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Michael Ross
✠ Minister ✠

By Annie E. Holdsworth

Author of "Joanna Traill, Spinster,"
"The Gods Arrive," Etc.

New York
Dodd, Mead & Company
1902

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Michael Ross, Minister

CHAPTER I

"In the man's strength lies his weakness," said Ruth Nettlefold unexpectedly.

She let the garment she was making slip to the ground. The movement in her expression slackened. One could see that she had fallen to a slower pace and was trying to grasp the meaning of her words. Her glance fluttered past the women sewing round her, and alighted on the text printed over the chimneypiece. "Whatsoever a man soweth that shall he also reap." They were in the large vestry of the chapel, a low-ceilinged, whitewashed room. Ranged from the wall were wooden benches in lines, that in front of the fireplace folded inward to form three sides of a square.

The benches claimed relationship with the pews of the chapel into which the vestry opened, a claim supported by the text stenciled over the fireplace. Through an open door the chapel could be seen, the shadows sweeping round its

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silence. The light from the vestry flickered over the nearer pews; but the windows were closed and the pulpit was draped in a wavering darkness. Its presence imposed itself on the women seated sewing round the fire. The flames showed a broad effect of prim faces, tightened muscles, solemn eyes, a sense of Sunday, due also to the wearing of Sunday clothes. The dresses were like their wearers' faces, severe, drab, narrow, hard of outline. In the midst of them Ruth Nettlefold's white serge struck a note of distinction that was only silenced by the amazing distinction of her face. It showed every emotion, every refinement that the others lacked. It bloomed among them like a summer lily in a bed of dahlias. At the sound of her voice every eye was on her.

"Now, Ruth, what in the world do you mean by that?"

Ruth's fluttering attention was caught and impaled on the point of Arabella Kent's question.

Miss Kent was a bleak young woman in a gray alpaca gown that did justice to her angles.

Ruth looked at her, a charming smile curving her lips and kindling her eyes.

"Really, Arabella, I don't know myself what I meant."

"That's just like Ruth Nettlefold," said Arabella. "She is always saying things she can't explain."

It was quite true. Ruth's ideas outran her

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experience of life. They were wider than her twenty-five years that had been hedged in by the brick houses and narrow streets of a little coast town. They had not been fostered in the sewing society of the Independent Chapel of Great Lowlands. Mrs. Nettlefold sighed over Ruth's queer ways. What other young lady in the town dreamed away her life on the cliffs or among the abbey ruins?

Ruth picked up her work and glanced at Arabella, who was biting her thread with the snap and precision of sharp scissors. Arabella was sister of the only doctor in the town. Her manner was hard and bright and cold; Ruth had sometimes thought it was like the instruments in Lewis Kent's surgery. Her thin, hooked nose was a divining-rod for finding out drains and insanitary conditions. Her brother would miss her if she should ever marry. But would she ever marry?

Arabella surprised the twinkle in her eyes; and, ignoring Ruth, crossed over to the table by which Mrs. Nettlefold stood sorting a pile of clothing while she listened to the group.

"I have finished feather-stitching this shift, Mrs. Nettlefold. Can you give me another?"

Mrs. Nettlefold turned towards her a large red face that nature had intended to be placid.

"Dear me, Arabella, how quick you have been; your needle has gone as briskly as your tongue to-day."

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"It's Ruth that has done the talking," said Arabella. "She is ready enough to talk in the Minister's defense."

"Well, talking or no talking, you never worked like this in Mr. Dawson's time. In fact, my dear, it's only since the new Minister came that I have noticed you at the sewing meeting at all."

The speech was barbed, the new Minister being young and unmarried. Arabella retorted by a silence that struck to the heart of Mrs. Nettlefold's consciousness that her only daughter was single. A year ago Ruth's unmarried condition had been what Mrs. Nettlefold called her "cross"; but lately the cross had become less weighty. The new Minister was often at their house. When he did not consult Deacon Nettlefold on Church matters, he consulted Ruth and her mother.

Since his arrival at Great Lowlands a new good-nature lurked in the folds of Mrs. Nettlefold's chin. The flowers in her bonnet brightened from resigned violets to hopeful geraniums. She sat in her pew on Sunday at peace with all women. She could listen to Arabella's piercing falsetto without disapproval. She no longer gazed wistfully at Dr. Kent standing rose-budded and gloved among the slouching rustics of the congregation. With eyes listening to the Minister, she calculated the days that would make Ruth the Minister's wife.

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But Arabella's silence probed her complacency.

"It's time Arabella should know that Ruth has a right to defend the Minister," she said to herself; and she quickly caught up some fine nainsook from the table.

"Dear, dear," she bustled, "Susan Charm is sitting with her hands before her. That will never do. Take what work you like, Arabella, while I find something for Susan."

She smiled with all the urbanity of the president of the sewing society. Her black silk rustled crisply as she hurried from Arabella to the other side of the room. "Susan," she said, raising her voice ever so little. "I'm thinking these nainsook camisoles, and indeed all the fine underclothes, might as well be cut to Ruth's pattern. And they must be trimmed with real Valenciennes. I shall soon have to be seeing to her things, and it seems only right her trousseau should help the chapel funds if she is to marry the Minister."

Susan Charm started. She was a dumpy little old maid with white curls and a big, humorous mouth.

"Well, I'm delighted!" she whispered joyfully. "And our dear Ruth is to marry the Minister? I always knew it was to be. It's not for nothing that marriages are made in heaven."

Mrs. Nettlefold sat down beside Susan and lowered her voice.

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"It's not settled, Susan; but it's as good as settled. The Minister looks as if he could kiss Ruth's shadow."

"Well, I'm not surprised," said Susan. "A young man is a young man, even if he is a minister."

"I wouldn't go so far," said Mrs. Nettlefold. She stopped, conscious of a strained silence in the room, and looked inquiringly round her. Her glance was at once a challenge and a menace. The young women, with hair drawn tightly from their foreheads and faces shining with soap, dropped their eyes and went on hurriedly with their sewing. The elders assumed indifference, all except Eliza Clarke, a good-natured woman with a matronly figure, who looked at Mrs. Nettlefold encouragingly.

"Well, now, Mrs. Nettlefold, you couldn't have said nothing to please me better. Nothing stirs life like a wedding, unless it be a funeral. And I never lay out a corpse without feeling I'd have the same pleasure in dressing a bride."

"Now, now, Eliza, none of your gloomy talk," protested Mrs. Nettlefold. "I always say Eliza Clarke's bread is as light as her heart; and I'm sure no one would say your heart was light if they knew your pleasure in funerals."

Miss Clarke's bosom shook to the sound of a great laugh.

"Well, I promise you Miss Ruth's wedding-cake shall be the lightest I ever made, Mrs. Net-

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tlefold. I'll put as much thought into it as if it were my own."

"Well, indeed, Eliza, it's time you were thinking of your own. I always say you must be waiting for Jacob Yates, else you'd have married long ago. You're a personable woman, with a tidy little shop of your own. And now your poor mother's gone, there's nothing to prevent your marrying, though not Jacob."

Eliza's mirth startled the whole room.

"Oh, Mrs. Nettlefold, you'll always have your joke about me and Jacob, and I'm glad Mrs. Yates ain't here to hear you. I won't deny I'm thinking of marriage. It's never too late to blend, as I say when mixing the tea I've stocked a good while; and I dare say I'll be ahead of Miss Ruth with the banns yet."

"You won't if the Minister has any say in the matter," Mrs. Nettlefold laughed. "Ruth will be Mrs. Ross long before you've even got a bridegroom in your eye."

Ruth lifted her head at the words, and stared before her with a frozen, outraged face that chilled her mother's gaiety. Mrs. Nettlefold turned hurriedly to Susan Charm, and warmed her satisfaction at Susan's sympathy.

"You and the Deacon must be very proud at the match," Susan whispered.

"Not proud; only thankful," Mrs. Nettlefold whispered back, smoothing down her black silk. "Mr. Ross is one in a thousand; only to-day the

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Deacon was saying so. You know Joseph Brunt, who was hanged last week? Well, the Minister went with him, though he's as tender-hearted as a child; and up to the very last he stood by him, encouraging him, and telling him to trust in the Lord's mercy. There was a light in his face as if he saw heaven opened, though in the very shadow of the gallows. . . ."

"And so it was!" said Susan Charm eagerly. "Poor Joseph, I couldn't bear the thought of it, if I didn't feel he was safe and happy in heaven."

"Happy! In heaven!" Mrs. Nettlefold exclaimed shocked. "Where's your religion, Susan! The thought of a murderer in heaven should be repulsive to every good Christian. And though Joseph was in drink when he did it, I hope he is being punished for his crime in everlasting torment."

"The Minister wouldn't say so," said Susan. "And it's not like you to judge harshly, Mrs. Nettlefold, especially when you should be so thankful for Ruth."

"And I am thankful," said Mrs. Nettlefold. "It's a great responsibility for my daughter, especially as the Minister has money."

"That's no drawback, especially in the Church, where children are apt to come quickly," said Susan. "I always say money is to life what salad is to cold beef."

"And you are right, Susan; though Ruth will never want, no matter what family she has. I'm

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thankful to say the Deacon's investments are sound. No, Ruth is not like Cornelia Janes, who married old Mr. Dawson for the sake of a home."

"I never understood that marriage," said Susan. "Cornelia is such a fine, intellectual creature, and Mr. Dawson three times her age, besides being a widower. I don't know why she did it. In her place I should always see him walking with a wife of his own age on his arm, and no room for me at all."

Susan's shudder set her curls shaking.

"I'll never forget her eyes the day she was married," said Mrs. Nettlefold. "And she so young too. But there, I never did understand Cornelia with her moods and mysteries. Instead of being happy on her wedding morning, she had the look of a woman going to her death."

"Poor thing, poor thing! I don't wonder at it, so young, and an old man! And if she had waited she might have married the young minister instead of the old one."

Mrs. Nettlefold straightened her back. "Our Heavenly Father forbid!" she cried. "Cornelia to mate with an angel of light like Mr. Ross! Why, Susan Charm, you forget she was only a governess. The Minister and my Ruth are made for each other. They're both rich and well connected, though he is a bit of a Scotchman—a match if ever there was one."

"That's true indeed, Mrs. Nettlefold. He has

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just the same bright, happy nature as Ruth has. And they are both fair, besides being handsome and a good height. Not but what Cornelia is more than handsome. I never saw the woman yet who didn't look commonplace beside her. As for the men, they are such fools. . . . Dear me, Mrs. Nettlefold, that's surely the Minister. . . ."

Some one was knocking at the door. Susan pushed up her spectacles and smiled.

A sudden wind of expectation bowed every face towards the door. When it began to open, the elder women relaxed from their grimness; the younger ones bent hot faces and sewed industriously. Arabella's head alone was lifted, but her face fell as the open door revealed her brother.

He was a tall, good-looking man with fair hair and a short beard. His eyes were blue, and he wore a buttonhole of corn flowers. His glance and smile, which apparently included every one, was significant only for Ruth. With a nod here and a joke there, he manœuvred his way to her and sat down.

His presence set every one talking again. Mrs. Nettlefold looked relieved as she saw Ruth's icyness melt.

"I know Arabella is disappointed because it's not the Minister," she whispered to Susan Charm.

"Ah, poor Arabella, she hasn't much chance at

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her age," said Susan. "I must say her tongue is too sharp to be attractive."

Mrs. Nettlefold turned to the company and raised her voice. "I notice that talking always begins as soon as the gentlemen come," she said, shaking a playful finger at Dr. Kent. "Ladies, ladies, it is almost tea-time. Don't let us waste the few remaining minutes."

There was a sudden hush, in which a belated sentence fled unaccompanied across the interval.

"I am sure the Minister is the very image of one of the Greek figures in the winter gardens."

"What rubbish Arabella Kent does talk, to be sure," said Mrs. Nettlefold. "In her place I'd be ashamed to be so forward about Mr. Ross. But what can you expect of that hair—I'm sure the front is false—and no complexion to speak of?"

"I don't know that she's not right about the statue in the winter gardens," said Susan. "I never see the Minister and Ruth together without thinking of Adam and Eve in Eden—that is, of course, before they ate the apple," she added quickly.

"Well, Susan Charm, indeed I hope so," said Mrs. Nettlefold, suppressing her natural mirth; "but what do old maids know about such things? I doubt you wouldn't know the male serpent if you saw him. . . ."

The bench creaked with the weight of her facetiousness.

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"That must be the Minister," Susan exclaimed.

The door opened again. Mrs. Nettlefold looked with the others at the shuffling figure that entered. Then she got up impatiently.

"I declare, Susan Charm, you are just as bad as Arabella Kent, sitting with her eyes glued on the door, waiting for the Minister. That Mr. Ross? Can't you see that it's only Jacob Yates, that I told to come in to his tea?"

Susan said nothing. The women were all talking again. Shreds and scraps of talk, snipped out of the hubbub, fell about the room.

"We've never had such a minister. . . ." "The fisher-folk just adore him. . . ." "More than fifty were turned away from the chapel on Sunday night; no room. . . ." "They say Cornelia Dawson was asked to lay the foundation-stone of the new chapel; but her husband refused. . . ." "He's a hard old man. . . ." "They dug his grave when they began to build the new chapel. . . ." "Here's Mr. Ross at last. . . ." "Hush! You'll make him feel he is stepping across Mr. Dawson's grave. . . ."

A sudden silence clutched the voices and strangled them. The door opened again and the light from the sunset flooded the vestry. Clear against the glow stood the Rev. Michael Ross.

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CHAPTER II

RUTH paused on a point of cliff, her back to the ruins of the abbey, and gazed seaward. A storm frowned on the horizon. The gulls swung high and low against the dusk, their screams shrill over the underbeat of the waves. Ruth did not hear them, nor see the clouds gathering. The storm raged in her. She was pale with passion, and the fine lines of her face were convulsed.

"Oh, mother! mother!" she moaned; and the cry came from the depths of her shame. The isolation of her life in the community, in her own home, had ceased to move her. She thought she had long ago accepted it; and to-day she felt its fangs in her shuddering flesh.

She still cowered under the humiliation of the scene in the vestry yesterday. The picture branded itself on her eyes: her mother, fussy and important, ordering her trousseau in the ears of the gaping, uncordial women; the daughters jealous, their mothers resentful. She had kept silence, and now her silence arraigned her, made her accessory after the fiction. And yet, how could she have given her mother the lie before those gossips? She knew that now every shop in Great Lowlands would be weighing the

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chances of wedding orders. She herself had heard Mrs. Joyce of the livery stables say they must have new cushions in the landau for the Minister's wedding. . . .

And the Minister had never spoken a word of love to Ruth! She shrank as if Michael Ross had been present to see her mortification. She felt almost as if she hated her mother—the vulgar, tender creature who was hustling the Minister into a declaration. And if only she would be silent, it would come about of itself naturally and beautifully.

Ruth caught her breath with a hard sob. This publicity was hateful! The beautiful wings would be smirched before the fluttering love folded them in her heart. . . . And yet, had not love already lighted there? Didn't she know that Michael loved her?

The thought warmed the life almost killed by the winter of yesterday, and summer came flying. The roses blossomed on her face: a smile flowered on her lips. . . . Ah yes, he loved her, and he knew that she loved him. The love between them was a song without words.

But the secret was too holy to be thrown to the dogs of gossip; the pearl too precious for the swine of common report.

A glint of sun struggled out to be caught in her hair; the folds of her heavy white serge held the light. Standing high on the lonely promontory she felt the sweep and potency of a

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great passion, and she bowed her soul before that mighty wind of God.

It was difficult to believe that this girl could be the child of Jonas Nettlefold, builder and decorator, and of Mary his wife, who had been chief milliner in Great Lowlands, the high cliff-town that looked before to the tossing waves of the sea, and behind to the calm waves of the moorland.

Ruth sprang like a spray of fairy orchid from a gnarled, misshapen root. In the London school, to which the family wealth had sent her, she had taken her place unquestioned among girls of birth and breeding. But she had returned to her native town, to the society of small tradespeople and unlettered parents. The culture of the Independent Chapel touched high-water mark in Dr. Kent and his sister Arabella. Susan Charm, who was a decayed gentlewoman and read Ruskin, hid her light under the bushel of a Berlin-wool shop. Ruth loved the gay little spinster, and found her chief friend in her.

Cornelia Janes, who had taught the lawyer's children, had been her other friend. But Cornelia had married the old minister, Mr. Dawson, who had resigned his ministry immediately after, and lived now in a neighbouring town. Then Michael Ross had become minister at the Independent Chapel in Mr. Dawson's place; and suddenly Ruth had as many friends as she wanted.

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She thought of the first time she had seen Michael.

He had arrived in Great Lowlands before he was expected, and she had met him coming from the railway station, striding along, his eyes alert, noting, it seemed to her, every cobble in the street. She had remarked his force and the boyishness in his air, and had wondered who he could be. She had gone her way with a pleasant stir in her thoughts. It was good to see some one bright and young and active in the little old gray town.

And how he had stirred the town! The dead bones of the Independent Church rose up at the breath he breathed on them. His voice rang from the pulpit with an eloquence that filled the pews with strangers, and brought the summer visitors flocking to the chapel. More than one felt with Ruth that it was a pleasant thing to see his face and feel his enthusiasm.

His popularity grew and grew; and at the end of the year Deacon Nettlefold hinted—behind a diffident hand—that the chapel was too small for the congregation; they must have a larger one.

The hint might have died of its own diffidence but for Arabella Kent, who pricked it into life with a pointed retort. "My brother," she said, "has always considered the Minister's foot too small. He proposes to take it off, and supply him with a larger."

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The sarcasm was broad enough to be recognized even in Great Lowlands. The Deacon's motive was visible to every eye till Susan Charm decently covered its nakedness.

"Whether the Deacon is a builder or not," she said stoutly, "the chapel is too small for the Minister. We must have a new one, and I'll give the first five pounds towards it."

The building fund was started, and land was bought before Arabella had sharpened her tongue for another retort.

But by the time the foundations were dug, Arabella was building with the rest, for the Minister in his shirt-sleeves was working among the workmen. No one could resist his enthusiasm, as no one could resist his friendliness. He was so single-hearted, so winning, he made friends with every soul in the town. He had a smile or a kiss for every child, a hearty word for every creature, cat, or horse, or dog. He knew them all, as he knew every boat down at the shore, and could name them all.

Where he went life stepped more gaily, death came more tenderly. He would run in and talk or read to a woman over the wash-tub till the week's wash did itself without effort. He would mount the ladder in Susan Charm's shop, and pack the wool on the high shelves to save her little maid the risk of a fall. He had taken a trowel and had done mason's work with Jacob Yates to spare his son, who was weak from an

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illness. There was nothing he did not do. He christened dolls and made tops, played cricket on the green, took an oar in a fisherman's boat, and was adored by everybody.

And what was Ruth that she could resist him?

He was almost the only cultured person of her acquaintance; no other man had ever touched her imagination. She had known Lewis Kent all her life, and she still thought of him as a masterful boy.

Apart from the doctor, there was no one in Great Lowlands that Mrs. Nettlefold could look upon as a possible husband for Ruth. Between the Church people and the Dissenters there was a great gulf fixed, a social gulf which no member of Michael's chapel ever expected to bridge by marriage.

The Miss Madisons, the Rector's daughters, envied Ruth's beauty. They agreed that it was thrown away on a girl whose father was a Dissenter and in trade; and they never suspected that the girl's refinement and education equaled their own. They saw her sometimes walking with Michael, and they shrugged their shoulders at the pretensions of Dissenters and tradespeople. Michael looked like an exceptionally well-dressed young curate. Ruth in her white gown—it was a whim of hers not to wear colors—had an unquestioned distinction. The Rector's daughters would have stared if any one had told

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them that the eager conversation between the two had for its subject literature or dogma.

Michael had fallen into the habit of talking over his sermons with Ruth, until she had come to see with his eyes, and now did not recognise the meagreness of the experience he clothed in ample garments of phrase.

As she thought about him to-day on the cliffs the light came into her eyes and stayed there.

Memory flitted about his blue eyes, the brown hair tossed off his forehead, his grave profile—the square, receding chin. She was glad his chin receded; her divinity should have some weakness to prove him human.

Yesterday she had said that his weakness lay in his strength. She reflected that it was true. His moral nature was developed to such an extent as to make him actually timorous in the conduct of life. He was almost afraid of doing right lest he should do wrong. She could imagine him fiercely meeting an army; but she had seen him shrink before the question of denying membership to a murderer.

And this man, strong, upright, tender, loved her. She hugged her secret as if the winds that tore round her might wrest it away. She sheltered it from the menace of the waves deep below her. It was like a little child folded close, her own little child to whom even Nature has no right.

A gust of wind nearly swept her over the cliff.

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She woke from her dream to see the skies swathed in storm. Far out on the horizon white sails were beating up the wind. Ruth watched the boat with a tingling interest. "My ship is coming in," she smiled. "They are the white sails of love coming to me."

The wind caught her skirts and twisted them about her. She freed herself, laughing defiance of the buffet of the storm. Wind and rain had been her playfellows from her childhood. She loitered, watching the vessel in the distance. She hated to go back to the caged life at home.

It was her mother's reception-day. She would have to sit in the drawing-room—that Olympus of plush and pretension—and make tea for their visitors. Of course, the draper's wife would come; indeed, she always presented herself on Mrs. Nettlefold's day, which, to the social world of the chapel, had the same importance as Sunday to the religious world. Ruth could see her swelling with praises of the fit and style of their head dressmaker. "Quite Parisian, I assure you, Mrs. Nettlefold. Indeed, the Miss Madisons say that she leaves nothing to be desired. I don't know if you have seen their last tailor-made suits. I am sure no one could guess they were not made by the best London houses. And evening dresses the same, though a minister's wife would not need more than a handsome black silk. It's not as if Ruth stood silks and muslins as other girls do; and I must say Miss

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Madison is a picture in a flowered delaine with pink ribbons. . . ." And Mrs. Leeson, the bootmaker's wife, would call, bustling and cheery because Leeson had come back with a lovely stock of white satin slippers, ready for a wedding, if so be there should be one in Great Lowlands. . . .

Ruth could see their glances that specified by avoiding her. She had been through it all before, but after her mother's words yesterday, the attack would be redoubled.

She set her lips resolutely. She would not go home. She would go to Susan Charm, and take tea with her. Her glance wavered on the sail in the distance; then she gathered up her skirts, and ran down the path that led to the shore.

The waves were churning in the passage between the rocks, and the seaweed was moist and black with the water they tossed up. In another hour the tide would cover the slimy banks.

She passed the harbour where the fishing-boats were folded. A wooden-legged fisherman leaned his elbows on the harbour wall and stared dumbly at sea and sky. He was a member of the chapel, and Ruth knew him.

"Not going out to-night, Stedman?" she called as she ran by.

"No, no, missie. We'd never get back if we did. There's foul weather coming. Yon boat would do well to make t' harbour."

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A queer superstition gripped Ruth.

"The boat is not in danger, is it?" She waited for the answer as if it held her fate.

"Well, there's no saying, missie. She may be, or she may not. But 'when at sea make for the shore' is my advice to her. I've always said there's a deal o' comfort in feeling your anchor bite the bottom when there's water above and water below."

Ruth hurried on. "If the love coming to me doesn't make the harbour, . . ." she said to herself.

The wind had swept the High Street of people. Her feet clattered on the cobbles as she hurried along to Susan's shop.

She went through the neat rows of whitey-brown parcels, burgeoning into magenta and yellow and purple where the wraps were open. The fingering and wools lined the walls with colour, and set a brave front to the struggle and loneliness in Susan's life. She was not at the counter, and Ruth passed on to the parlour behind the shop.

Susan was there, sitting on a stool near the fire. A Persian cat purred comfortably among the cushions of the only armchair. The room was three-cornered, and dark except for points of light where mahogany and pewter and crystal caught the glow of the fire. Over the fireplace was a row of shelves on which stood cups and plates of Crown Derby. A sampler hanging on

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the wall betrayed Susan's age to the curious. On each side of the sampler were framed photographs of ladies with sloping shoulders and men with black stocks. Among these, insolently modern, was a photograph of the Minister, and a faded one of the old minister, Mr. Dawson. The round table under these two photographs bore a wool mat on which was a vase, a china hand grasping a china tulip. On the third wall hung Mr. Ruskin's works—"my only extravagance," Susan explained to new acquaintances.

A copper kettle dozed on the hob beside a muffin-dish, and Susan, with folded hands, dozed in front of the fire.

"Just in time for tea, Susan!" Ruth cried gaily. "How good the teacake smells! And potted shrimps? Give me some this very minute."

Susan started up, her white curls shaking.

"Oh, Ruth, how you frightened me! But you are as welcome as flowers in May. Sit down, my dear, and we'll have tea at once! Dear, dear, how storm-blown you look! . . . No, don't disturb Tobias. Dear fellow, he's not very well, I think. He's been nervous and unsettled all day. Sit here, my dear, out of the draught. I wouldn't disturb him even for the Minister."

"You shouldn't give up your chair to Tobias, lazy fellow," said Ruth.

"My dear, I bought Tobias on purpose that he

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might sit in that chair," Susan said, a quaver in her voice. "When—when its emptiness distressed me, I . . . I bought Tobias. He was a kitten then."

She turned her face from Ruth, and the girl checked her laugh. She studied the tea-table a moment. "Two places, Susan? And the best china, and Tobias with a ribbon? Are you expecting any one to tea?"

"Well, I was, my dear. The Minister said he might come in to his tea; but he was going to the Cove to see Phœbe Bassett; and I doubt he can't get back in time. You will save Tobias and me from disappointment."

A great stillness held Ruth's face. Susan's look fell back from it baffled. She set the kettle on the fire, talking all the time.

"You know, my dear, Tobias thinks the world of the Minister; but I tell him it's only because he knows we have shrimps for tea when Mr. Ross comes."

"What a calumny!" Ruth laughed. She knelt down and buried her face in the cat's fur. "You and I know better, don't we, Tobias?" she purred. "We know you like him for himself, don't we?"

Tobias opened sleepy eyes and looked her full in the face. There was irony in the directness of his gaze.

"It was the Minister christened him," said Susan, beaming on the two. 'Is the child a boy

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or a girl?' he said, as grave as grave. 'A boy, sir,' I said; for you know, Ruth, I don't think it seemly to run the risk of kittens with a young maid like Barbara in the house, and myself not married. 'A boy, sir.' And Mr. Ross answered, 'Then let it be Tobias.' . . . So Tobias he was, and I've never regretted it."

When Barbara had cleared away the tea-things, Ruth took a hassock and sat down beside Susan. She leaned her head on her lap; the two women sat gazing into the red coals.

"Susan," said Ruth suddenly, "supposing one's ship never came in?"

"I don't think that often happens, my dear. . . . The ship comes in, but sometimes we don't recognize it as ours."

"I should know mine," said Ruth decidedly.

"Ah, my dear, we see the boat go out in the morning with golden sails spread, mistress of a calm sea. And we wait and wait for it to come back. And when the sun sets, and a battered hulk labours to shore, we don't see that it is our ship come back to us with torn sails and broken masts. . . ."

"No, no!" Ruth cried, her eyes frightened. "It is not ours; the wreck is not the ship we have waited for."

"So youth says, my dear. And yet the wreck, as you call it, may hold the treasure we have been waiting for all our lives."

"No, no!" Ruth cried hoarsely; "my ship

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will come in with golden sails, and no sign of storm. . . ."

"Dear child, I think so, I hope so, but it's the boat that has lived through the storm that is fit to bear you out to sea. . . ."

"Susan," the girl said passionately, "love is not love if it can be wrecked."

"My dear, love is love if it outrides the storm."

Ruth dashed away the tears in her eyes.

"If it be wrecked, it will be mother's fault," she said. "Susan, he has never said a word to me—and mother made you think we were engaged. You heard her last night."

She stopped, choking. Susan stroked the girl's head.

"My sight is not as good as it was, Ruthie; but I don't need spectacles to see what the Minister is thinking of. There's wedding-favours in his eye, my dear. Your mother is quite right."

Ruth shook her head, staring into the fire. The wind howled down the chimney; door and window rattled.

"I'd give anything to know if the boat got in," she said vaguely. Before Susan could answer, the maid burst into the room.

"Oh, if you please, ma'am, if you please, miss, you're not to expect the Minister. He said I was to tell you. He's gone to the shore . . . there's a ship on the rocks!"

Ruth was on her feet. She pushed past the girl in the doorway.

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"Ruth, Ruth, oh, my dear! No hat! No cloak!" Susan's cry whistled past Ruth as she dashed out of the house into the wind and the rain.

She ran along the High Street, her white dress flashing in and out of the dusky figures hurrying shoreward. Every moment a gun, like a pulse, boomed through the storm. Night had fallen.

Down at the shore the foam, churning among the rocks, made a line of light between two darknesses. Beyond the line was the black hulk of the vessel. You could hear the shouts and cries of the men on board; you could almost see their figures when the gun flashed its summons. A crowd had gathered on the shore, whipped into a knot by the rain.

"She's on the rocks! You can't help her! She'll go to pieces in ten minutes!" The voices on land shrieked with the wind. Ruth clove her way to the front.

"The rocket apparatus! We can save them yet," rang out a voice close to her. It was Michael. She had found him by instinct.

"The apparatus is away. . . . At the North Cove. . . . Heaven help them! . . . She's doomed! . . . . No boat can cross these rocks. . . ."

"There must be a way," Michael shouted. He ran forward till the waters lifted their heads and licked his feet.

"Throw a rope!" he cried to the sailors; and

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his voice was like a trumpet. "Throw a rope, and we'll catch it."

There was no answer, and he turned, desperate, to the crowd. "They can't see where to throw. . . . A light! A light! Get a rocket, a lantern! . . . Make a fire! A light, for God's sake!"

"No light will live in this rain," Stedman sang out.

Ruth clung like a shadow to Michael. She caught his arm.

"Let me come. . . . My white dress. . . . They will see!" she cried shrilly, rushing past him.

She stepped on a ledge of rock, and her figure shone shadowy white in the darkness. Michael steadied her as she swayed.

"Throw the rope here! Here where you see the white!" he shouted.

A whirling sound and a thud told where the rope had lashed the water.

"Failed! Oh, my God!" The hoarse cry was Michael's.

"Again! Throw again!" Clear and sweet Ruth's cry sounded, cutting a path for itself through the wind.

Again the rope came swinging; and again the hungry waves gulped it in. Then a grating, sickening sound shivered through the shivering storm, and a groan went up from the sea and shore.

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"Oh, my God! she's breaking away; the tide is taking her out!"

Again the rope whizzed and fell short.

Ruth threw up her arms above her head.

"The boat, the boat! Is there no one to save?"

She did not know that she stood alone; and yet she knew that it was Michael who had dashed into the water. There was surging of waves in her ears, Stedman's groan, "It's the Minister. The Lord help and save! It's the Minister!"

Then another cry, "Help, men, help!"

Even the storm seemed to hush at that voice. Ruth tottered forward, her feet slipping on the seaweed.

"I am coming, dear," she sobbed. "Wait, wait, I'm coming to you."

Gasping, she fought her way across the slime that held her.

"Ruth, are you mad?" Arabella Kent's hand closed round her arm like a vise.

"Let me! Let me!" Ruth struggled. "Oh, don't you hear? He is drowning!"

Stedman pushed past the women, his wooden leg slipping at every step. "Easy, easy, Miss Ruth. If I can't save him I'll die with him."

"My turn first, Stedman!" Lewis Kent shouted cheerily. He swung to the front. "Wait here and catch the rope."

"You want fifteen men to hold that rope," Arabella shrieked. "It's death, two only!"

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Kent seemed to hear nothing. The moon struggling out lighted his face. It was like a mask.

"Help for the Minister!" he sang out.

"The Minister! The Minister!" the cry ran along the edge of the crowd. "Help for the Minister!"

"Courage, Ruth! We'll save him yet!" and Lewis plunged into the waves.

The crowd scattered and formed again. Men broke through, stood on the edge of the darkness, and disappeared in its surge. Women fell on their knees sobbing, "Lord help him! Lord save him!" Half-fainting, Ruth heard shout and shout answering other shouts. Then came a steady, "Yo, heave ho!"

"They have got the rope! They are pulling it in!" Arabella screamed.

The moon trailed a wan light across the water, showing the men in line.

"Steady for the shore, lads!" It was Michael's voice, strong and hearty.

Ruth stood with breath arrested. She seemed to be listening for another voice.

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CHAPTER III

THE Minister was stepping along the High Street, his air brisk, his eyes keen. In his appearance there was no trace of the fatigue of the evening before. He swung along as if he had not spent the night tending the men he had saved from the wreck. They were all lodged in his house: he had given up beds and sofas to them. He needed no rest himself.

The storm was over. The wide street held the morning sun, a quiet guest after the turbulent winds that had chased through it twelve hours before.

Great Lowlands might have been described as a town of one street. From end to end the High Street ran in a wavering line like a river of cobbles. It had quaint corners where masses of ivy strayed over high walls. Behind the walls were gardens full of old-world flowers. Every house almost had its garden, so that the street was broken into green spaces and tree-shaded intervals. Among these, two or three unobtrusive little shops hid themselves away. Eliza Clarke's shop made no pretension; but it supplied the whole town with groceries and bread. It stood almost opposite to Dr. Kent's house, whose diamond-paned windows commanded the

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stretch of street which contained the public hall and the Methodist chapel. Beyond the doctor's house was Susan Charm's "Berlin-wool Repository," and beyond that again, almost at the end of the street, was the Nettlefolds' house, The Poplars. Michael lived at the other end of the town in a pretty old cottage standing back from the street. The cottage was not far from the Parish Church, and was close to the new chapel. The space between was occupied by humbler houses, and a block of shabby tenements reared itself close to the white walls. Michael made a wry face when he came near to them. Those houses were the fly in the ointment of his success.

The new chapel would show to no advantage while they remained standing. Then his face changed, and a flash of fun lighted his eyes. He stopped and looked down at Tobias, Susan Charm's cat, who was slinking past him.

"Tobias," he said severely, "I don't wonder you are hurrying on without speaking to me. You have been making a night of it, sir, and I am ashamed of you."

Tobias stopped too, mewing disconsolately. Michael saw that the thick gray fur was bedraggled, the bushy tail dripped from many tassels.

"A more disreputable person I never saw," said Michael sternly; but he lifted the cat and comforted it, drying it with his handkerchief.

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Tobias scratched up the nap of Michael's coat, and purred obtrusively with restored self-esteem.

The Minister laughed, and set the cat on the pavement.

"Well, I won't tell your mistress this time, sir. Go your way; your secret is safe. You may trust me."

He walked on, smiling at himself and shaking his head.

"Weak again, Michael; you cover the sin for love of the sinner. Your attitude is immoral. Where you love . . ."

He drew himself up, then strode on again, his face shining.

"Where you love." The image of Ruth was before him, a shadowy beacon, lighting the wrecked seamen to safety. He had loved her before as a woman. He thought of her now with worship. There had been something supernatural, illusive in her, last night; but she had been beside him, helping and inspiring. He thought of her as he saw her, Sunday after Sunday, listening to his message. He had weighed his success in the balance of her favour, and it had not been found wanting. She had become his inspiration. Her face held high and beautiful ideals; it was a house of dreams. "A house of dreams"—the phrase caught his fancy. He found himself repeating it when he drew up in his walk opposite the new chapel. The walls stood before him, the empty spaces of doors and

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windows giving the white stone a phantom effect. "A house of dreams," Michael repeated.

The workmen had not yet come; he must wait for them. He spent every morning at the chapel, seeing that plank and stone and brick was without flaw. He meant the chapel to be perfect in every part, an embodiment of his aspirations. "A house of dreams" he said again, wistfully.

He took off his hat and stepped inside the walls; already the place was "dreadful" to him —it was the House of God. He looked round him and saw the building finished, his church—the largest in the town. He saw it crowded with eager listeners, Ruth's face lifted in love and pride. Last night she had shown him her love; surely by the time the new chapel was open she would be his wife.

His heart felt suddenly warm. It would be symbolic and beautiful if their marriage service should be the first service in the new chapel. The old chapel was dingy and worm-eaten; a dismal setting for love's consecration.

His lips twisted humorously. He smiled, thinking how far ahead imagination had raced. The chapel was only just begun; he had never hinted his love to Ruth.

"A house of dreams, a house of dreams," he said, smiling indulgently. But he did well to dream. The walls round him were solid enough. He knew that Ruth loved him. He walked to the end of the building. The communion rails

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would be here. This was where they would stand to be made man and wife. . . .

He knelt down among the bricks and mortar, and prayed. The sun was on his head, matching the glow at his heart; but he was suddenly chill. He opened his eyes and saw that the shadow of one of the workmen had fallen across him.

It was Jacob Yates. He stood, hat in hand, waiting for the Minister to finish his prayer. Michael rose and went towards him.

"A rare day, Jacob," he said, shaking hands.

"A fine morning it is, Mr. Ross. And the Lord be praised you are here to see it! Last night I thought I'd never look on your face again. I must say I think the minister of a growing cause hasn't any right to risk his life for strangers."

"Oh, there was no danger," said Michael, lightly. "I was in no danger. But when I'd got the rope the vessel had begun to drift, and I couldn't have held on without help."

"Danger or no danger, a minister's life belongs to his people; and with a new church building, you would have been a loss, sir; I may say a serious loss."

"Well, there's no loss, you see, Jacob," Michael said gaily.

"I see, sir; indeed, as things are, I may say it's a distinct gain. The whole town will hear of what you've done, and it will have an effect on

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the congregation. I think and hope next Sunday will be a high day. There'll not be an inch of ground vacant in the chapel on Sunday."

"In that case we ought to have a collection," said Michael.

An eager flash shot out from Jacob's screwed-up eyelids. He rubbed his hands with a sly triumph.

"It's exactly what I was going to propose—a special collection for the building fund. It's an opportunity, Mr. Ross. Why should you risk your life for nothing, when money is money? The life of the cause is the congregation, and the life of the congregation is the money circulating."

"It might be done, of course," said Michael, considering; "a collection for the building fund, a special sermon, and the subject announced by posters." He knitted his brows as he thought.

"A good catchy subject with a taking title would draw," said Jacob, shuffling from one foot to the other. "For instance, 'Out of deep waters' would be taking and appropriate."

Michael's boyish laugh sent sounding echoes about the walls. Jacob tightened his lips in disapproval of the Minister's levity.

"No, no, Jacob; but I have a subject, and the posters can be printed at once. I'll see the Deacon about it. Let me see . . . 'Sunday next. The Rev. Michael Ross. A House of Dreams. Collection in aid of the Building Fund.' That's enough, eh?"

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"There's nothing like helping the fund," said Jacob. "A young man may deceive himself about his popularity, but the test of popularity is the collection. If the cash-box is lively, the Church will be lively too."

Michael assented vaguely. He was already thinking of his sermon.

Jacob shook his head when Michael left him.

"He's not up to old Mr. Dawson—apt to be flighty; don't think enough about money. A man prays better on a full stomach, and a Church will fatten according to what you put in its inside."

Michael's face was sober as he walked along. He was wondering if Jacob had meant anything in that remark about self-deception. But how could he have deceived himself as to his popularity when every Sunday the chapel overflowed? Within six months of his arrival in Great Lowlands every sitting had been let. The new chapel was a proof that he did not overestimate his influence. And it was so easy to maintain it. A few notes, a fluent style, a sympathetic manner, and he achieved more than the men who toiled and laboured over their sermons! Already he saw Sunday's sermon complete, though the subject had only occurred to him a few minutes before. He thought humbly and gratefully of his gifts.

Suddenly he was almost tripped up in his walk. A little child had run along and thrown two

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arms round his legs. Michael lifted her up and kissed her sticky face.

"Why, Nellie, where are you going to, all by yourself?"

Nellie kicked her legs as they dangled.

"Want to ride a cock-horse. Nellie want to ride a cock-horse."

"Very well; you shall ride a cock-horse. But first we must tell mother where you are."

He stopped at the shabby block of buildings and called out, "Nellie is with me, Mrs. Brunt. I'll see to her."

Mrs. Brunt came to the door, wiping her hands in her apron. Her dull eyes brightened when she saw Michael.

"Oh, sir, I'm afraid Nellie's a naughty little gel—and her face so dirty, too. Let me wash her and put her on a clean pinner."

"Not a bit of it, Mrs. Brunt. She is as sweet as a flower, and she is going to have a good ride."

He set the child on his shoulder and pranced along the street, making wonderful curvets and gambols, while Nellie screamed with a fearful pleasure.

Mrs. Brunt had not smiled since her husband's tragedy, when disgrace and death had darkened the house, but watching them her face lightened.

A man passing turned to look.

"That's the sort of parson for me. No damned nonsense about him. I've a mind to go and hear him preach."

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"You couldn't do better," said Mrs. Brunt. "He laughs with the childer; but if your heart is breaking, it's the Minister that bears your sorrow with you."

"Had enough, Nellie?" Michael, red and breathless, had stopped near Susan Charm's shop.

"No; more! more!" She whipped him with her hand, and he galloped past the shop.

Susan watched him from behind her window. Arabella Kent, who was buying scarlet worsted and describing the wreck, moved away from the counter and stood in the door to watch.

"What a boy he is!" she said.

Michael touched his hat with his disengaged hand, but did not check his speed.

"Morning, Miss Kent; morning, Susan," he called, laughing as he passed. His eyes were twinkling; his face was as gay as Nellie's.

Susan pushed her spectacles up to her curls and beamed on him.

"Dear fellow! Even the children love him. I should like to see him with a child of his own."

"I don't believe he'll ever marry Ruth Nettlefold!" said Arabella, turning suddenly.

"But they are made for each other! It's only a question of weeks, I am sure!" Susan gasped.

"He needs a stronger nature than his own," said Arabella.

"Well, I've seen marriages before, and I always notice that a man is always more bent on

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marrying what he fancies than what he needs." Susan glared mildly at Arabella. "And as for Ruth, to look at her is enough ——"

"No it isn't!" Arabella snapped. "The real Ruth isn't what we see. She looks strong and splendid and handsome; but she gets the effect with her height and those heavy white gowns of hers. Put Ruth into one of Miss Madison's dresses, and she would be a mere doll. . . . No, Susan, the Minister needs a strong woman for his wife." She walked over to Susan and lowered her voice. "He needs a woman like me; and I am going to marry him," she said.

Susan fell back before her determined face.

"You, Arabella; you?" she panted.

"Why not?" said Arabella coldly.

"Oh, my dear, I don't know. Only. . . . Dear, dear, I'd as soon think of his marrying an ambulance."

Arabella drew herself up rigidly. "I'm going to marry him for all that."

"I don't believe it!" said Susan, pulling herself together. "You may as well tell me my Tobias is a tabby."

Arabella's laugh chilled her certainty.

"I am always terrified when a woman tells me she is going to marry a man," Susan quavered. "Sooner or later I know she will do it."

"You are thinking of Cornelia Dawson's marriage, Susan. By the way, she is coming on a visit to Ruth. Did you know?"

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"Ruth told me," said Susan feebly. "I wonder how she will bear to see another man in her dear husband's place?"

"I think she will bear it stoically. Cornelia is a philosopher, you know. . . . I must go. . . . Pay you another day, Susan. Five ounces red worsted. . . ."

She snatched up her parcel, and was out of the shop before Susan understood she was going.

"Dear, dear me; she is so determined. What can she be after now?"

Susan tottered to the door, and looked up the street and down the street. The sunny winter morning dashed great splashes of sunshine on pavement and cobbles. The shadows from leafless trees embroidered the path with a lacy network. In the blue sky a screen of leafless boughs stood before the high altar of the sun. The deserted street was a shrine of peace, and the content of life; and the white-haired old lady looking out on it felt that life was good. Then she caught sight of Michael, in the clutches of Arabella, walking under the shadow of The Poplars, and her face became troubled. Her mouth dropped. She tottered back to a chair.

"She is a determined woman," she gasped. "I should be afraid for the Minister. But the Lord will be mindful of His own. He will temper the wind to the shorn lamb."

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CHAPTER IV

JACOB YATES stood in the porch of the Independent Chapel, his lips tightened over his teeth, repressing his triumph. The chapel was already full, yet the street was busy with people hurrying to the service. He made quick calculations of the number that could be crushed into the communion rails and along the aisles. Ah, it was indeed time the new chapel was finished.

He looked regretfully at the posters pinned over the table in the porch. "*A House of Dreams. Collection in aid of the Building Fund.*"

Those who were turned away were so much money lost to the Building Fund. He wondered what the Minister meant by "A House of Dreams." "But it doesn't matter what he means: it's the way he says it that takes with the people," he reflected.

"Morning, Jacob," said a hearty voice. It was Eliza Clarke, best-bonneted and smiling. Jacob's Sunday severity maintained itself, but he stepped out of the porch for a gossip with her.

"There'll be a grand collection," he said, jerking his thumb towards the chapel.

"Then I'll save my penny," said Eliza. "Let give and let give is my motto; and there's no

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need to encourage the cause when others will do it."

"You're right," said Jacob; "the more we have, the more we had ought to cling to it. It's only them as has nothing can afford to give."

"I always say so," said Eliza cheerily; "and the Lord has prospered my business. Yea, I have a goodly heritage."

"And no one to leave it to!" said Jacob.

Eliza smiled genially. "There's no telling. I ain't an old woman yet."

"Here's my old woman coming," sighed Jacob, his face dropping; "and Jimmie with her."

Mrs. Yates, a small, rigid woman, and her son, a long, lanky boy with white eyelashes, were on the road.

"They're a pretty pair," said Jacob bitterly.

"She's trying," said Eliza cheerfully, "and age don't improve her. You'd ha' done better if you'd waited for me, Jacob."

"I've thought the same myself," said Jacob gloomily.

She laughed good-naturedly, and went into the chapel.

A step gave quick, short crunches on the gravel. Jacob turned to speak to Arabella Kent.

"In good time, Miss Kent; and your seat is kept empty for you."

"That's right, Jacob. Tell your wife I'm sending round another bottle of bitters for Jimmie. The last has done him good—made a man of him."

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She turned round suddenly—"Oh, Mrs. Yates, there you are. Why, Jimmie, you're quite a man. But remember, you're not to go sweethearting till your father finds a wife for you."

Jimmie's face flamed. He wondered if Miss Kent had seen him talking to her maid the night before. He stumbled guiltily into the chapel.

Jacob followed him into the porch. He stood there meditating, his eyes on the ground. "He's quite the man, and she ain't an old woman," he muttered. "His father should find a sweetheart for him. . . . Yea, it's a goodly heritage."

The people flowed in, until they overflowed the porch itself.

Jacob closed his little foxy eyes, folded his hands, and prayed to be delivered from temptation to pride. There was not a minister in Great Lowlands who could "draw" the people as the Independent Minister drew them.

He wedged himself to the door and looked into the chapel. The pews were a solid block of humanity. The benches inside the communion rails were packed.

Michael came, his eager eyes sweeping the pews, his glance keen for every strange face. He ran lightly up the pulpit steps, fell on his knees, and remained in prayer.

At a sign from the Deacon, Jacob moved away, and the crowd in the porch flooded the aisles and surged even up the pulpit steps. Mr. Pace, the lawyer, had been swept in on the flood. He was

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a Churchman, and wealthy. Deacon Nettlefold put him into the Nettlefold pew.

The vast congregation was packed into the chapel, and there was a great silence.

Then the boyish figure of the young Minister rose in the pulpit, and every face was lifted to his face.

Above the muslin bands and the Geneva gown it looked white and shining, and the colours of the rose-window behind his head rayed out like a glory.

Ruth, gazing up at him from the corner of her pew, trembled with an unexplained emotion. Cornelia Dawson, sitting beside her, laid a hand on hers and quieted her, while she gazed curiously at Michael.

"He looks so young and good and earnest," she said to herself; "and he must have real power to hold a congregation like this every Sunday. . . . Ah! how good it is to be young and to have enthusiasms. . . ."

She contrasted Michael with her husband, who had stood in the pulpit before him. Spring had succeeded that rigid frost. She was only twenty-three; but her youth seemed far away. She had buried her enthusiasms long ago.

Suddenly her face became stormy. Sitting in the pew with her, partially screened by Mrs. Nettlefold, she saw the man who had wrecked her youth. She gazed at the lawyer with bitter disdain. Had she ever been so afraid of that mean

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little reptile, that to escape him she had snatched at Mr. Dawson's offer to marry her? Her heart rose, protesting at the life to which a timorous moment had condemned her. She arraigned the God who had allowed her to be snared before she knew what liberty meant. He was the God of the orphan and the fatherless, and He had not saved her from the safety that had ruined her. She might have fought shame and poverty; she could not escape from the life that God had joined to hers.

She was younger than the man in the pulpit. Yet the year was before him, while she was bound in the frost of a bleak, black winter. Her future was dead; but she might have had it in her to face life with the splendid fearlessness that she now saw in him. She might have healed the passions of men with the same pitiful eyes. She might have been strong too to save shipwrecked souls. . . .

"A House of Dreams." Michael's voice announcing his subject crashed among her thoughts. "I intend to speak this morning of life in its relation to our ideals. . . ."

Cornelia fixed her terrible eyes on him. They compelled him to look at her. He recognised their demand, and his sympathy held out full hands to her.

The splendour of her face had arrested his gaze from the moment he entered the chapel; now he saw that beyond the beauty and the appeal there

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were tragedy and mystery. Here was a soul to be snatched from death; a heart to be supported along the bitter way of life. His mind leaped to its task; he would save a soul alive.

Hitherto it had been Ruth's face that had inspired his teaching. This morning Ruth's face was the pale light of a lamp quenched by sunrise breaking through stormy clouds. He did not stop to wonder who the stranger might be. Against the background of stolid masks one living face stood out; in the silence of the great congregation one voice shrieked aloud for help. . . .

As he went on, Cornelia's eyes fell away from his. It piqued him. Surely she must understand that he had felt her appeal, that his message was to her! He went on, speaking more impressively, more sympathetically of life and its ideals—of the soul's responsibility to follow the highest, to realise its purest aspirations. He painted the ultimate dominion of the ideal in the soul of man. He showed the pure flame burning steadily through the storm of earthly passion. . . . Lawyer Pace, as he listened, made a movement of applause. A bitter smile was on Cornelia's lips. She drooped listlessly in her seat. Michael felt that the tension of her demand was also relaxed.

"I asked for bread, and he gave me a stone," she said to herself.

Yes, it was a stone; but a stone flashing with

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lights of shining phrase and brilliant metaphor. Michael was very eloquent. He was without doubt a preacher. "But he has no message for men that are tempted, for women who sell their hearts, for those who bury their dead," Cornelia thought.

She longed to get away from this florid atmosphere of words into the sun, within hearing of the robin's song.

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CHAPTER V

"Don't you think, father, it's a pity we didn't build bigger while we were about it? I don't believe even the new chapel would have seated the congregation this morning."

At his wife's question Deacon Nettlefold started, looked up from his book and straightened his glasses, which had fallen to the tip of his nose.

"Eh! what, mother? I don't know but what you're right. If you're building, build big, I say. I've always said it, and I hold to it."

The Deacon took off his spectacles and laid them between the pages of his book, a Life of St. Paul. He had begun it when Ruth was a child, and he had not exhausted it yet; indeed, he was still in the early chapters. "I never read anything secular on the Sabbath Day," he had told the Minister, whom he had surprised with the "Descent of Man," one Sunday. He stroked his chin and puffed out his lips, and considered the dimensions of the new chapel.

"If I hadn't had the building contract, my position as deacon would entitle me to counsel enlargement," he said. "But I have a delicacy in taking the other deacons with me. And yet, judging by to-day's congregation, the new chapel

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will not be large enough for the Minister. What do you think, Ruthie—should private interests interfere with duty to the Church?"

"I don't think we need consider the question," she said drily. "Mr. Ross is not likely to risk his life every week in order to fill the chapel on Sunday."

She got up slowly and trailed her skirts over the wonderful roses and tulips of the drawing-room carpet. She had not succeeded in making any change in the room. Mrs. Nettlefold rightly felt that the admiration and envy of her friends added more to her social importance than Ruth's approval. But among the "Art Etchings" on the wall was one that appealed to Ruth—the face of a woman floating on the waves that had devoured her. She felt sometimes that the woman might have been herself. She stopped before it a minute then passed on to the piano and stood uncertainly turning over some music. Mrs. Nettlefold gazed after her with mild exasperation, and the Deacon adjusted his glasses and went on with his reading.

"Is that a hymn you are playing, Ruth?" he asked presently.

"No, father; one of the Songs without Words."

"My daughter, I have told you I won't allow you to break the Lord's Day by playing songs . . ."

"It is scarcely a song ——," Ruth began.

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"Ruth, my dear, don't argue with your father. Play a Moody and Sankey hymn instead. No one can object to that."

Ruth looked at her mother with a pale smile, and rose from the piano. "I don't really care to play, mother."

She went to the window and stood staring into the garden. She was waiting for Cornelia to come down-stairs.

"The birds don't seem to make any difference for Sunday," she said, laughing suddenly.

The Deacon jerked up his head. "The birds are not redeemed souls," he answered.

"How glad they must be they are not!" Ruth said.

"Ruth, Ruth!" her mother exclaimed. "My dear, I sometimes wonder what sort of a pastor's wife you will make. I doubt if you will do much to build up the Church, and I fear the Minister will be disappointed in you. If only I could see more signs of true religion about you——"

Ruth turned sharply.

"Dear mother, you have forgotten your promise."

"No, I haven't, Ruth; and I won't again. Only I can't bear to see a young thing like Cornelia married and settled in a home of her own, while my own daughter——"

"Now, now, mother, I won't have Ruthie badgered," said the Deacon suddenly. "She has a right good home of her own, and I don't see

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why you should be so anxious to send her out of it. . . . Not but what I should be satisfied if she took a liking to the Minister. He is a rising young man, and has made a name in the town. And I think, Ruthie, you may go through the wood and take the crooked stick in the end. Think twice, girl, before you refuse Mr. Ross."

"Father, you have no right!" Ruth cried hotly. "Mr. Ross has never shown you a sign that he cares for me. I hate the very thought——"

She stopped suddenly. "Here is Cornelia," she said in a different tone. She went to meet Mrs. Dawson, and put her arm in hers. "Let us go into the garden, Cornelia."

Mrs. Nettlefold watched them as they went away together. "Cornelia is like a handsome artificial flower. Our Ruth looks like a poor white lily beside her," she grumbled.

"More like a tiger-lily," the Deacon grunted. "What's put her about so with the Pastor? Only yesterday Arabella Kent was saying that the night of the storm Ruth acted as if she was married to him already. And to-day she says she hates the very thought of him. What does she mean?"

"How can I tell?" her mother groaned. "I never understood Ruth and never will. I'm sure I've wished often enough I'd had a daughter dressy and bright, who wouldn't turn up her nose at matrimony."

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Mrs. Nettlefold sighed and looked plaintively at her husband.

"Ruth is a good girl, and a good daughter. I won't have her badgered," said the Deacon. "And if she don't want the Minister I'll see that she don't have him."

"Now then, father, don't you interfere," said his wife blandly. "A man in a love affair is like a bull in a china shop. Leave Ruth to me, or you'll spoil everything. A girl's affections are such a delicate plant, Paul may plant and Apollo may water, but only a mother can give the increase."

She walked slowly to the window, and watched the girls pacing up and down.

"What a colour Cornelia has!" she exclaimed; "and how well that purple poplin suits her! She's handsome to look at, and it's all wasted on her old husband, who is as blind as a bat. Well, it's my cross to have a daughter I can't be proud of, and I must pray for grace to carry it."

She turned to her husband; but the Deacon was again nodding over his reading.

By and by a maid announced Dr. Kent; and Mrs. Nettlefold smoothed down her dress and arrayed her face in smiles.

"I'm glad the Deacon is asleep," she said softly, taking Dr. Kent's hand; "I dearly love a talk with a young man. Come into the bow-window, Doctor, and we'll talk without waking him."

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Lewis followed her gingerly. The bow-window was an excellent place for conversation. He could watch Ruth in the garden while Mrs. Nettlefold spoke.

She babbled on, Kent listening and watching a point between the elm trunks where a white dress passed and repassed. His eyes looked happy to-day. He had often borne many hours of Mrs. Nettlefold without even a glimpse of Ruth.

"And as a friend of the family you really approve of the match?"

Mrs. Nettlefold's expectant silence roused him. He gazed at her.

"Approve? Why yes, of course. I always approve of matches. Who is getting matched now?"

"The Minister, of course. Haven't I been telling you about it? Only don't say anything to Ruth. She is so reserved, she might even deny it. But I expect Mr. Ross will tell you himself. It's a great relief to me that you approve. Young men know each other better than women do, and if you say Mr. Ross is worthy of Ruth, then I'll not have a single doubt."

A grim smile crossed the doctor's face.

"I don't think any man on earth worthy of Ruth," he said, crushing his gloves; "but I dare say Ross comes nearer to it than most. I don't know a stronger, finer fellow than he is ——"

"Why, your voice is as hoarse as it can be!"

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Mrs. Nettlefold exclaimed. "Wait! I'll get you some horehound candy ——"

"Never take medicine," said Kent, making a wry face; "know too much about it. But I must run. Remember me to the Deacon when he wakes."

He literally ran along the drive, dodging from tree to tree to escape Ruth and Cornelia. When he stopped outside the gate his face was gray.

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CHAPTER VI

THE garden of The Poplars was large and old, full of great trees whose shade kept the paths greens with moss. Long after Dr. Kent had gone, Ruth and Cornelia loitered about in the flickering gleam of the November afternoon. Ruth was speaking passionately.

"I think sometimes I can't bear my life, Cornelia! I can't breathe; I am stifled. It's the narrowness and ugliness of it. How did I stray into a family that keeps the Lord's Day and throws away all the rest?" She laughed, but there was no mirth in her laugh.

"Poor Ruth," said Cornelia. "And I think you have so much to be grateful for. You are not a minister's wife."

Ruth half stopped, then moved on.

"I don't think that can be so very dreadful," she hesitated.

"Don't you?" said Cornelia.

Ruth glanced at her, and immediately looked away again. She remembered that Cornelia had married a minister.

"How did you like Mr. Ross this morning?" she said nervously, hastening past the dangerous topic.

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"He didn't interest me," said Cornelia wearily.

"Not!" Ruth exclaimed. "Oh, Cornelia! and I wanted you to like him."

"I like the man"—Cornelia spoke considerингly. "It is splendid to have his force and his outlook. . . . He holds so many possibilities. One wants to know what he will make of his life."

"He will develop the real from the ideal," Ruth answered eagerly.

Cornelia gave her a smile, half-pitying, half-envious.

"Ruth, you are very young if you think that possible. Most of us develop the ideal from the real, and it's only sordid. I wonder what his ideals are?"

"Oh, Cornelia, didn't you hear what he said this morning? When he spoke of the House of Dreams I know he was thinking of his great ambition. He means to build a church of humanity—men who live, and women who love, and lives that strive. The new chapel is only a symbol of his idea. He examines every stone, every plank that goes into it, and sees that every part is perfect. . . ."

"Then it isn't a symbol of a church of humanity," said Cornelia. "Every part of that will be imperfect."

"I wonder," Ruth said vaguely. "You must go and see the new chapel to-morrow. You know your husband's name is on the foundation-

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stone. Mr. Ross said that Mr. Dawson's work here had laid the foundation of the new church. He is so modest about himself."

"He did not strike me as being humble-minded this morning."

"Oh, Cornelia!" said Ruth reproachfully. She turned away her head. "I want you to like him," she said again.

Cornelia gave her a long look. "Have you a special reason for wishing that?"

"No, no," said Ruth hurriedly; "you are quite mistaken. But you don't do him justice."

Cornelia remembered the words she had overheard—"Mr. Ross has never shown a sign that he cares for me. I hate the very thought." Taken with Ruth's disclaimer they left no doubt that Ruth's interest in the Minister was not personal. Cornelia wondered that he had produced so little impression. Her wonder influenced her reply.

"I like the man better than I like the minister," she said warmly. "When I saw his face this morning, I felt as if he might make even me feel young again."

"You poor dear! Yes, you do look old. You have lived so quickly."

"Ah, so quickly, so quickly! And yet, I have not lived at all."

Cornelia threw out her hand. There was a tragic note in the silence following.

"I have no future," she cried suddenly; "not

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even a House of Dreams. I have no faith, no hope, no love to build it with."

Ruth began to speak. She stopped, seeing Cornelia's face. This was not the girl who had been her friend, but a woman who had plumbed the depths of life with experiences that she could not guage. . . . Cornelia had always been passionate. Ruth wondered what tragedy hid behind that locked door of silence.

She seemed to be listening to Cornelia's thoughts, to see the tragedy walking in purple poplin. . . . She thought of the face of the drowned woman over which the waves had passed. Cornelia's eyes were like those eyes staring coldly at death.

Ruth lifted her head, choking. The moment weighed on her with the weight of past wrong, with all the heavy mystery of the future. Its significance swept over her like waves chilling her face. The icy water smothered her. . . .

She struggled from the terror, and looked round her dazed. The sunlight paled in the garden. The elm before her was leafless; it bore the wintry blossom of a tattered nest. The scent of autumn violets lingered beyond the cypresses.

Cornelia turned to her. Her eyes were far away; they had followed her thoughts.

"Ruth, let me stay with you and try to forget. If I could get away. . . . You will let me stay?"

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A crow lighted beside the nest and set the bough swinging. Ruth turned heartily to Cornelia.

"Let you stay, dear? Of course. It would be lovely for me to have you. You must stay all the winter. And . . . and I think Mr. Ross might help you. . . . Father says many a good building can be made of the waste material . . . and perhaps it may be so in life."

"No one can help me!" Cornelia said harshly. "If I had had a little child. . . ."

She broke off. Her face was again the face of the drowning woman. Ruth thought of the shipwrecked crew that Michael had saved. He stood before her, splendid, great, sufficient.

"He is so strong," she said aloud. "Dear Cornelia, don't decide that he can't help you till you know him better. If any one can help you, he will."

"Can he give back what I have lost?" Cornelia asked bitterly.

Ruth could not meet her mood. She stooped down and picked some violets. "You must talk to him when he comes on Thursday."

She lifted herself up and put the violets in Cornelia's hand. "They are so sweet, they seem to bring back the spring. One wouldn't think they grew so close to the cypresses."

But Michael did not go to The Poplars on Thursday. His desire to see Ruth had failed—killed by the overpowering desire to be justified

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in the eyes of the stranger who had belittled him. He had raked the chapel with his eyes on Sunday evening, and had not seen her. He could not forget the weariness and dissatisfaction that had succeeded her appeal for help. He had never before failed in meeting a demand. . . . He comforted himself with memories—Arabella Kent's attitude, Ruth's worship.

But he was not reassured. Neither of these women had passed through the storm and stress of life. Neither of them had known a syllable of the story that had seared its passion on the stranger's face. And yet she was a mere girl. He felt instinctively that love had not been among the passions that had marred her face. Marred! It was not marred, his thoughts sprang to justify her; it had seemed to him noble and beautiful.

If only he had helped her in her trouble!

"I failed because her experience of life is deeper than my own," he thought humbly. "She has lived; and I have only dreamed of life." "Her experience of life is deeper than my own"—the words clung like burrs to his consciousness, a pricking irony. He tried to brush them away with bristling doctrines, with points from his books of divinity. They remained to prick into his content with himself as a shepherd of the flock. "The hungry sheep look up and are not fed." Was it true? Was his spiritual experience inadequate to the needs of his people?

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He was restless and unsettled. Even the building of the chapel absorbed him less. He spent most of his time writing at his desk; but he tore up every sheet as fast as it was filled. The sermon for Sunday refused to be written. On Wednesday afternoon he tossed aside his books and got up from his desk, stretching his arms wearily. "It's purely physical. I'll see if Kent will get rid of these cobwebs for me."

Dr. Kent's house had bow-windows that commanded most of the street. From behind the wire blinds Arabella spied Michael at the door, and gave the maid directions.

"Dr. Kent at home, Sarah?" Michael asked, shaking hands with the maid. She was a member of the chapel, and taught in the Sunday-school.

She blushed and smiled to see him.

"He was a minute ago, sir. If you'll step into the keeping-room I'll say that you are here."

The keeping-room was Arabella's boudoir. Michael's eyes, seeing it, twinkled. Its effect was hard and naked and bony. . . . The whitewashed walls were pictureless, except for a copy of Rossetti's "Annunciation." The floor was cold with cane-matting. The chairs were straight-backed and unyielding. A bunch of dry grasses filled the grate. Some medical books stood on a white enameled table.

"Chill and virginal, like Arabella herself," Michael thought, looking round him amused.

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She came in, her voice slashing at the silence.

"How do you do? Sit down. I'll have a fire in a minute; it's laid and ready to be lighted."

She began to lift the grasses from the grate, talking all the time.

"You are such a stranger. I haven't seen you since the night of the wreck. What a night it was! Do you know if Ruth took cold?"

"I . . . really . . . no. I haven't seen her since," he said.

"Not seen her since?" She stared at him, a bunch of pampas grass arrested in her hand. "But she was in her pew on Sunday!"

"Was she? I didn't notice," Michael said vaguely. He was thinking how lean and uncompromising Arabella's expression was.

"Well, I didn't know you were so unobservant," she cried; but the answer pleased her. "Not much love there, if he doesn't know whether she is in chapel or not," flashed through her thoughts. "But I suppose a minister never does see any of his congregation," she said aloud.

Michael was silent. The face of the stranger gleamed in his memory.

"I must call and ask for Ruth," Arabella went on. "She is so delicate and unpractical. She reminds me of a glass jar in which you can put dead rose-leaves, but not living flowers."

"I scarcely see your distinction," said Michael carelessly.

He looked at the door and wished the doctor

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would come in. He looked at Arabella in her tight alpaca, and he wished he might go out.

"Don't you see?" she cried. "Ruth is crystal clear; but her mind is so delicate. She is not fitted for the practical uses of life."

"She has the mind of an idealist," said Michael, picking up a glove that he had purposely dropped. He felt that he was undergoing a surgical operation without anæsthetics.

"That is what I mean, Mr. Ross. Ruth is a visionary made for storing ideals, not for serving living purposes. Let me be quite frank with you. I am your friend, and Ruth's friend, and therefore I may speak. No, wait. . . ." Her finger stopped his protest. "When I think of Ruth as your wife——"

"But this is very premature!" said Michael, reddening.

He moved towards the door. Arabella stepped between it and him, waving the grass. "No, let me speak. Of course you know gossip says you will marry her; but you should live above gossip. She would be a most unsuitable wife for you. You must have seen that in her conduct down at the shore. She was so hysterical, she was of no practical use whatever."

She advanced as she spoke, and Michael edged away from her till he was stopped by the window curtain. He stood there frowning, wondering whether he ought to silence her by telling her that he hoped to marry Ruth. But her advance

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deterred him. He shrank further behind the curtain.

The "Annunciation" hung on the wall before him. It struck him there was something comically like the Angel's in Arabella's attitude—her lifted hand, the plume of grass. He could imagine his own expression of shrinking fear—like that of the Virgin.

But himself as the Virgin and Miss Kent as the Angel of the Annunciation! . . . His lips twitched, his eyes twinkled; in spite of himself he shouted with laughter.

"It is no laughing matter," said Arabella, offended. "The choice of a wife is a serious thing, especially for a minister. I must warn you before it is too late. You are young and inexperienced. You should marry a woman whose experience of life is greater than your own."

Michael stared, his attention arrested. Those very words had been in his mind ever since Sunday. "Her experience of life is greater than my own."

At this echo of them a conviction sprang full-armed from his brain. The stranger, with the splendour of strength in her face, was the woman he needed beside him. He had known it in the first moment of seeing her.

The idea of marrying Ruth dropped from him like a dead leaf from a tree, and was whirled away in the tumult that possessed him—the great

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and strong wind that had rent the future and broken in pieces the rock of his past.

He trembled; but while he trembled he felt the warmth of a kindled flame. He warmed his hopes at the fire.

Then he heard a still, small voice that was surely not Arabella's: "And she will make you true to the strength in you."

He roused himself; his eyes were shining. Then he caught her hand and wrung it till he hurt her.

"I don't know how to thank you! You have saved me from ruining my life!"

He looked at her with such feeling a woman of ice must have taken fire. Arabella faltered before him.

"I am glad! I am so glad! You think I am right?"

"Right!" he exclaimed; "of course you are right. You are a—an angel, announcing a new life!"

He would not wait to see the doctor, who, she told him, had gone out; but at the front door Kent met him.

"I came to see you; but I've had a talk with your sister, and I don't need to trouble you," said Michael, a little shamefacedly.

"Oh, come in, come in," Kent said heartily, leading the way to the consulting-room. He bent his brows and gave Michael a searching glance.

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"H'm; nothing wrong with you except misplaced energy. If men would only spend as much energy in reforming themselves as they spend in trying to reform others, we'd need no new chapels."

Michael laughed. "Not a word against my new chapel. There's nothing in life worth doing but building it and filling it."

Kent gave him a queer look.

"If you had a wife, and I were she, I'd be jealous of your religious enthusiasm. I wonder if you will always be a minister first and a man second?"

Michael smiled back frankly.

"Oh, I think so. And I fancy my wife will find that I am a better man in the degree that I am a conscientious minister."

Kent shrugged his shoulders.

"Don't burden your office with a conscience. Conscience doth make humbugs of us all. According to my gospel, the healthy man is the real minister."

"My conscience is as robust as my body," said Michael gaily.

"Then look to it," said Kent drily. "We are only aware that we have consciences when we wish we had not."

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CHAPTER VII

JACOB YATES shuffled round a bend in the High Street, and looked furtively up and down. The street was full of the winter day, and the houses wore their wintry air of chill and rigid age. The faces of the bricks were faded and wrinkled. The leafless branches of the trees were the skeletons of spring.

What long, bleak shadows the boughs cast about Eliza Clarke's shop! When Jacob had courted her twenty years ago the shop had always been set in a bower of green. He was coming courting again; but this time his feet dragged, and he looked guiltily up and down the street.

He heartened himself by remembering that in these twenty years Eliza had made a mint of money, and it was there waiting for any unscrupulous man to get hold of. Women never knew when it was time to stop thinking of marriage. He pursed out his lips and shook his head regretfully, meditating on the use Eliza's thrifty ways would have served if he had married her. His wife was no manager. She was as willing to feed the neighbours' brats as her own. He had seen her give the shawl off her shoulders to a shivering woman. With such a mother it was

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no wonder Jimmie was a poor creature. . . . Ah, it would have been a deal better to have waited for Eliza. Suddenly a flash of life brightened the street. A girl came singing along —

> "Awake, my soul, and with the sun
> Thy daily stage of duty run ;
> Shake off dull sloth, and early rise
> To pay thy morning sacrifice."

It was Sarah, Arabella Kent's maid. She stopped singing when she saw Jacob, and smiled at him across the road. He was aware of her shy pleasure at seeing him, and the knowledge was pleasant.

"Good-afternoon, Mr. Yates," she called merrily.

"Good-afternoon, Sarah," he answered stiffly. "A seasonable day for the time o' the year."

He shuffled past, his eyes dropped, so as not to see her blushing face and happy eyes, and Sarah walked on repulsed. Her steps slowed a little as she went on, and she did not sing any more.

Jacob reached Eliza Clarke's shop, and stood hesitating and stroking his chin. He wished he had not met Sarah just then. She was neat and trim and young. She had a pretty smile, and had looked glad to see him. It made him think of Eliza as she had been when he had come courting her twenty years ago. And now Eliza was double-chinned and elderly, and getting on in figure. Eliza was his own age. He felt suddenly

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old. He looked after Sarah, to see that she was not watching him. Then he slipped warily into the shop.

He had time to see the signs of prosperity before Eliza came in: the rows of bread and cakes, the shining tins, the packets of candles and starch, the bars of soap, the bacon hanging from the beams, the fragrant cheeses, the garlands of onions. Everything was in order, everything was fresh and new. There was no old stock here waiting for customers. A crusty smell from the bakehouse stimulated his admiration.

But he wished Eliza would come in before he had time to meditate on Sarah's happy young face.

"Sit down, Jacob"—even Eliza's voice sounded big and hot and occupied—"sit you down while I finish this batch of bread."

He looked at her stout red face, at her bare arms as hot and red as her face, at her figure in the loose, short gown, and he had to clear his throat before he could speak.

"I'll come into t' bakehouse with you. I want a private word, Eliza."

He followed her into the bakehouse.

"What you want is a man to help you," he said, with a glance at the pans filled with rising dough, the kneading boards, the tins waiting.

"A man?" she laughed; "what man would I trust to bake my bread? Why, every loaf is like a child of my own. I often say a batch of

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teacakes is a little family." She laughed again, and wiped her face with her apron.

"Look here, 'Liza; this here work is too much for you. And what better help could you have than a husband as would take an interest in the business, as well as sparing you, knowing your value as a thrifty woman?"

Eliza sat down on a flour-bin, fanned her face with her apron, and looked at him with broad amusement.

"It's twenty years since you've recommended marriage, Jacob. Who is it I'm to marry now? —for it isn't yourself, we know."

"No," he said slowly, "it ain't myself; the Lord not seeing fit to remove my thorn in the flesh, the messenger of Satan sent to buffet me. No, Eliza, it ain't myself—it's Jimmie."

"Jimmie!" Eliza roared. "Oh lor, Jacob! Jimmie as I've dandled as a babe, and had a fancy for because he ought to have been mine!"

"That's it," said Jacob. "You've always had a fancy for him; and nothing suited him better than running off to t' shop. Many's time his mother have spanked him for sneaking off to you."

"That's true," said Eliza reflectively. "What a boy he was for a bun, to be sure!" A tender gleam came into her eyes.

"And would be again," said Jacob, pressing his advantage. "He'd take to the business, and being younger than you, you'd have a man's help

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without a man's control. And he's too soft to interfere with your managing your money."

"Jimmie," said Eliza slowly. "Well, to be sure, Jimmie."

Jacob could see her mentally weighing the idea of Jimmie as a husband.

"There's the oven now ——" he began.

"Lor, so there is!" said Eliza, jumping up with amazing energy. "When marriage is made in the head, the bread is marred in the hoven. To think that I should have forgot my baking!"

She seized a wooden spade and began to shovel out the loaves and put them on the stone shelf. When the oven was emptied, she sat down again, and mopped her face with her apron.

"Lor! it should take down my weight, but it don't," she gasped.

"Jimmie would spare you that," said Jacob; "he'd maybe come in useful with regard to them little families o' yourn, Eliza."

"Oh, get along with your jokes," she chuckled; "and me old enough to be his mother!"

"A woman in her prime ain't to say old," said Jacob gallantly. "Jimmie would make a poor show beside your figure."

"He'd be like a son to me; and his mother would hate me more than ever if I took him from her," said Eliza, smiling genially.

"I grant you 'twould pay off old scores," Jacob answered. "She've twitted you with being an old maid, and always jealous because you was

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my first thought. We ain't been a united couple, Eliza."

"Marriage is poor traveling for them that's not on the box," said Eliza thoughtfully.

"With Jimmie you'd have the reins and the brains," said Jacob, getting up. "And I don't know but what you'd be comfortabler that way than married to a man as would drive you. And married you should be, Eliza, for the sake of the business, and before age creeps on you."

"I dare say there's something in that," Eliza answered. "Well, I'll have a talk with Jimmie, and see if he's willing or no."

"He'll have to be willing, willing or no," said Jacob grimly; "and I'll send him round to you this evening."

He went out of the shop glowing with satisfaction. The matter was as good as settled, and Jimmie was a made man. There need be no courting. If the thing was to be, it would have to be quickly, before Sarah could persuade Jimmie to choose a wife for himself.

He saw Michael, and shuffled away in another direction. If he spoke to the Minister, his satisfaction in his arrangements for Jimmie's happiness might be chilled.

Michael had no desire to speak to Yates. Jacob's presence always affected him uncomfortably, like the touch of a reptile. He saw that Jacob had turned towards the Nettlefolds' house. He had been going there himself; but he decided

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not to risk the chance of meeting him. He went instead for a walk along the cliffs. He passed the rocks where he had saved the shipwrecked crew. The sea played and dimpled where it had shown its teeth and devoured the vessel. Michael thanked God that he had been of use to some one, though he had failed the stranger. . . . He was back again at the haunting memory, and his thoughts flew round and round it, until they alighted on Arabella's words—a rod that had budded.

Looking down from the pulpit on Sunday morning, his face changed. Did the face in the Deacon's pew belong to a living woman, or to a dream that he had dreamed?

A new note dominated his manner that morning, a repression that captured Cornelia's approval.

"Ruth is right," she said to herself; "he is a strong man."

His subject was not a chiselled optimism glittering with phrases. He spoke humbly of righteousness and judgment. Cornelia forgave his eloquence. "To-day he hangs his garlands in the temple of action," she said.

Watching the openness and charm of his face, she forgot to listen to his words. The sermon was his good face. She studied it wistfully. "With him I should not have wandered into strange places," she thought.

Michael's eyes feasted on her face. "With a

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woman like that beside me, I should be a strong man," he was thinking. The words of the Benediction were on his lips; but the "Amen" that followed sealed the thought more than the prayer.

He did not go to The Poplars. He had no business with the Deacon, he did not wish to see Ruth, and it had not occurred to him that the stranger in the Deacon's pew was Mrs. Nettlefold's guest. He had made no attempt to find out who she was, though he might have done so from Susan Charm. He was abashed and silent at the discovery of her. When the time was ripe she would come to him. In the meantime he worked harder than ever at the new chapel; only, now he told himself that he was building two holy places.

At The Poplars Mrs. Nettlefold wondered a hundred times a day what had become of the minister. "He must be afraid of you, Cornelia," she said. "He hasn't called since you came; and he was always running in and out—to see the Deacon," she added, at a glance from Ruth.

During these days Ruth's face had a strained look in it. Michael had not come to the house since the day of the wreck. She tortured herself with fear that she had betrayed her love that night and revolted him. And behind the fear was the memory of the omen of the ship that had come in only to be wrecked.

Before long she was comforted by finding a

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reason for his absence. She and Cornelia were taking tea with Susan Charm. Suddenly a voice in the shop sent a breeze of expectation through the parlour.

"It's the Minister! Just in time for tea!" Susan bustled up, smiling. "Ruth, my dear, ask Barbara to make another slice of buttered toast —he does neglect himself so at home. . . . Yes, yes, Mr. Ross, coming! . . . Buttered thick, Ruth. Dear, dear, and to think there's only potted meat. . . . I would leave Tobias in the chair, Cornelia. . . . Well, Mr. Ross, I'm delighted to see . . ." The door closed on the end of the sentence. Ruth and Cornelia heard the man's voice fall from its breezy height. They looked at each other. Then they looked away again, as if each was hiding an expectation. Ruth cut a slice of bread and toasted it thoughtfully. By and by the shop-door slamming closed a little door in Ruth's heart.

"He wouldn't come in, my dears," said Susan, "though I told him Ruth was here and Mrs. Dawson too. He had no heart, poor fellow. Ah, responsibility is a heavy plough for youth to plough with. I dare say the Deacon has mentioned the Minister's trouble?"

"No! What is it? What has happened?" Ruth's voice rang sharply.

"Poor fellow, I do feel for him. My hands are all of a tremble thinking of it." Susan sat down sighing, and looked vaguely at Ruth.

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"Susan, I'll shake you," Cornelia threatened. "Tell us what has happened. . . . Has he lost his mother—his money, or his character?"

"No, my dear, none of them. His mother died long ago. He has independence still, if not wealth; and his character is as safe as the Apostle John's in Patmos."

"What is it?" Ruth asked hoarsely.

"It's a difference with Jacob Yates, my dear; and it's a dreadful thing to happen. Jacob will never forgive him, never; and Mr. Ross knows it."

Ruth laughed suddenly. She stopped and kissed Susan.

"Is that all? Oh, Susan, you goose! I thought something terrible had happened."

Susan set her spectacles straight and looked benevolently at Ruth.

"Ah, my dear, you think lightly of it; but the crack in the wall that you can't see to-day may bring the whole building down on you to-morrow."

"Is the crack in the wall of the new chapel?" Ruth asked gaily, pulling Tobias by the tail for sheer happiness of relief.

"It's in the old chapel, my dear; and the new chapel isn't built yet. Pray heaven the old walls won't fall before the new ones are built up. . . . Ruth, my dear, I wish you had the Minister's gentleness. He would never pull Tobias's tail."

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Ruth looked round smiling. "I am very sorry, Tobias, but you have so much tail to pull. . . . I won't do it again, Susan; tell us what Jacob Yates has done."

"That's a man I don't trust," said Cornelia. "I never could understand why he was such a favourite with my husband. How is he troubling the Minister?"

"I may tell you, for everybody knows," said Susan. "Years ago, you know, Jacob was to have married Eliza Clarke; but she wouldn't leave her mother. Jacob married another woman, and Jimmie was born, and everything has gone well, till lately, since old Mrs. Clarke died, and Eliza was left with a bit of money and the shop. Whether it is Eliza, or the money, or the shop that Jacob wants to keep in the family, I don't know; but he's persuaded Jimmie to marry Eliza. Jimmie is seventeen, and Eliza forty-five, and they are to be married next week."

"But what has that to do with Mr. Ross?" said Ruth.

"My dear, he won't marry them. He says the marriage is unnatural, and Jacob is taking advantage of the boy's ignorance; and he won't be a party to it."

"He's quite right," said Cornelia passionately.

"I don't know if he can refuse," said Ruth hesitatingly.

"Mr. Ross says he never knew anything but wrong and sin come of wedding old and young,"

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Susan went on. "He says it's unrighteousness before God, and he won't help in any way to do it. I beg your pardon, Cornelia, for alluding to disparity in marriage before you; but I'm telling you what the Minister says, and I know Mr. Ross never heard of your case; so it's not personal."

Cornelia looked at her with a sudden hardening of the face.

"Don't Susan! There's no need to apologise. Jimmie Yates is more fortunate in his minister than I was in mine. The man that read the marriage service at my wedding congratulated me afterwards. He would have done better to curse me—as God has cursed me!"

"Cornelia, my dear, my dear! you shock me! And you, married to a minister of God! . . ."

"Yes," said Cornelia in the even voice that belonged to her frozen passion; "Mr. Ross is quite right. Wrong and sin come of such marriages as mine. But why did no one warn me?"

Susan stretched out a trembling hand. "My dear, I wanted to; but delicacy prevented me. I can't explain to you, but circumstances. . ."

Her voice failed.

"It doesn't matter," said Cornelia.

She got up, and stretched herself wearily, and her eyes fell on the photographs of the two ministers on the wall. She looked on the faded image of her husband, at the unyielding will

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in the face, then at the eagerness of Michael's youth.

"The greatest irony of life is to miss life itself," she said, turning to Ruth with a queer smile. Ruth shivered at her expression; but she had still something to learn from Susan.

"Why is this Yates affair so serious for Mr. Ross, Susan?"

"Because, my dear, Jacob has influence in the Church, and can undo all that the Minister has done to build it up. Mr. Ross won't see that; and even if he did, he wouldn't marry Jimmie to Eliza against his conscience. I must say I honour him for it."

"So do I," said Ruth proudly. "Let Jacob do what he can; we'll stand by Mr. Ross."

"I wish your father felt the same, Ruth. He has told the Minister he don't approve of the pastor setting up to oppose a man who has done so much for the cause as Jacob has. And the Minister answered, right or wrong was a matter of conscience. I know it's caused a jar between them. Mr. Ross told me to-day he hadn't been to The Poplars for a fortnight. He said he would wait to be invited before he went again."

Ruth was suddenly glad. His absence was explained. The clouds rolled away and left the skies blue above her.

"You must invite him to tea, Ruth," said Cornelia. "I want to know him. I begin to think he may have the makings of a man in him."

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"We'll invite him to tea to-morrow," Ruth cried joyfully. "It shall be afternoon tea, so that he need not be afraid of meeting father."

"No, don't ask him," Cornelia said quickly. "I was only joking. I don't want to meet him."

Ruth opened her eyes. "Goose! Of course you must meet him, if only to say he is better than you thought. Mustn't she meet Mr. Ross, Susan?"

"My dear," said Susan soberly, "we meet if we are destined to meet. You and I have nothing to do with it. We are in God's hands."

"Are we in God's hands?" said Cornelia in a hard voice. "I sometimes wonder whether we are in God's hands or the devil's."

"In the devil's certainly," said a man's voice at the door.

They all started, and turned to see Lewis Kent, hat in hand, smiling and twinkling. He came in, and his honest blue eyes flashed amusement across the women's faces.

"Isn't it the devil that has led me into the very jaws of temptation?" he said gaily. "What do I care about Mrs. Yates's lumbago? You will let me come in, and give me tea and smiles, and not too much theology? No one expects a tired man to resist temptation; and I shan't try to."

"Sit down, sit down," said Susan cordially. She dragged a chair forward, and gave him some tea.

The doctor sipped his tea, leaning back in his

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chair, and they could see how worn he was. A vague pity stirred in Ruth's heart. He seemed so forlorn, he appealed to her motherliness.

"Arabella doesn't look after you," she said.

"Arabella?" he laughed. "Why, how can she? She is down at the shore, making poultices for old Stedman's wooden leg. The Minister has just gone along to pray with the wooden leg and admire her practical kindness."

"I won't have you mock at the Minister," said Susan, gaily; "he does as much work in the world as you do."

"I think so myself," Kent said. "But that doesn't say he accomplishes much. In fact, ministering and doctoring are the two unproductive trades. In Ross's case the effect of his preaching is his practice. In my case my only practice is in preaching."

"What do you mean by that?" said Ruth.

"A doctor never makes the mistake of meaning anything. If I implied anything, it was that in this affair of Yates, Ross has shown real grit. Very few men would have stood up to Jacob Yates as he has done."

"You think him a strong man?" Cornelia asked unexpectedly.

"Hm!" said Kent; then he looked up pleasantly. "The fact is we are all Samsons in resisting other people's temptations."

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CHAPTER VIII

"To meet Mrs. Dawson." Michael frowned as he turned over the note. It was signed Mary Nettlefold, but the handwriting was Ruth's. Two letters of hers were in his pocketbook. Remembering them, he took them out of it, tossed them into the fire, and watched them burn without regret. That incident was closed. It seemed impossible now that he had ever thought of marrying Ruth. It seemed equally impossible that Ruth could ever have thought he would ever marry her.

The invitation to tea at The Poplars was embarrassing. He had no wish to meet Ruth, or her mother's solicitude for him, or Mrs. Dawson. He had already met Mr. Dawson, and the hard old minister had repelled him. No doubt Mrs. Dawson was equally old, equally repellent. But he was on bad terms with Deacon Nettlefold, and it would be policy to accept the invitation.

Afternoon tea was a term that in the country suggested the afternoon. At three o'clock Michael started for The Poplars. Mrs. Nettlefold in the drawing-room window looked up from a handful of millinery and saw him at the gate.

"Oh, Cornelia, here's Mr. Ross coming, and I

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at my millinery! Serve me right for bringing it into the drawing-room. Whatever would the Deacon say if he saw me trimming a bonnet before visitors? Help me to get these things together, there's a good creature. The Deacon can't bear me to be seen making bonnets. 'There's no need to tell everybody that you earned your living that way,' he says over and over again. But, dear me, it's natural to take pleasure in doing what there's no obligation for you to do. . . . That's the Minister ringing. I'll just take these things and come back at once."

She bustled to the door, where she stopped.

"And oh, Cornelia, if Ruth should come in before me, don't, I beg you, tell her I was altering my new bonnet."

Mrs. Nettlefold disappeared at one door as Michael appeared at another. The light flashing over his face when he saw Cornelia lit her own cheek. She rose and held out her hand.

"We have seen each other before. Won't you sit down? Mrs. Nettlefold will soon be here."

Michael took her hand and held it and looked down at her. His manner seemed to claim her; and it was not till Cornelia drew away, reddening, that he recollected himself.

Then he searched round and round again, but failed to find any seat on which to sit down.

He laughed shyly and gave Cornelia a deprecatory glance.

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"I feel like a dog turning round and round before he can find a place. What has become of the chairs?"

"There are six within a yard of you," Cornelia laughed.

The tragedy and mystery had gone from her face. He saw only a brilliant illusiveness, a radiant promise in her attitude towards him. He grasped at a chair, sat down, and shone on her.

"He is a charming boy," Cornelia said to herself. She liked his shyness, his embarrassment, his silent appeal. She smiled to think that this man was "a popular divine."

"What was it in my sermon that disappointed you so?"

His armed question charged at her gaiety and overthrew it. The shadow leaped to her eyes again.

"I wanted help, and you didn't help me."

"I know that." He too was serious now. "But I wanted to help you. It's a preacher's work to help his hearers."

"I don't think you will ever do much for people until you forget preacher and hearer, and speak as a man to men."

He leaned forward, brow set, eyes eager.

"Tell me what I ought to do."

He had forgotten the woman who had captured his future. For the moment his first need was to regain his place as a teacher. Cornelia recognised his strength in the attitude that expressed

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his weakness. Their eyes flashed together with the impact of naked swords. She steadied her glance.

"Go down to hell and preach to the souls there," she said.

They talked for half an hour. When she was silent his head remained bowed on his hands. At last he looked up, and she saw a new expression in his eyes.

"You will teach me?" he said.

"No, no," Cornelia protested. "We learn from life—from ourselves."

Mrs. Nettlefold came fussing into the room.

"I don't know what you will think of me, Cornelia, leaving you alone so long. . . . And you've had to entertain Mr. Ross all by yourself. Well, I needn't introduce you to each other. I see you are friends already."

Michael was on his feet. Cornelia's presence had been like a bush aflame with God. The ground was holy, and Mrs. Nettlefold profaned it. He could not talk commonplaces.

"I am sorry I can't stay. I only came in for a minute. Make my apologies to the Deacon and Miss Nettlefold."

"No, Mr. Ross; I can't let you go. Whatever will Ruth say when she comes in and finds you gone? We didn't expect you till four, or I'm sure all the king's horses and all the king's men wouldn't have drawn Ruth from the house. Cornelia, why don't you persuade him to stay?"

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Cornelia shook her head, smiling.

Michael's face was set. "You must excuse me. . . . Another day. . . . To-morrow, perhaps. . . ."

"Oh, if you make it to-morrow," Mrs. Nettlefold yielded.

He met Susan Charm at the door. She carried a reticule holding her knitting and a cap. There was an air of festivity about her dancing curls.

"Dear, dear, Mr. Ross! . . . Not going so soon, surely? I thought you would be here to four o'clock tea. I wanted to hear what you thought of Mrs. Dawson."

"I haven't seen her," he said. "I am not able to stop to see her."

He hurried on along the mossy path between the cypresses. The smell of violets was in the air; it was part of his exaltation—a memory of Cornelia.

He went directly to the new chapel. The roofless walls were full of the echoes of her words. Her eyes had accused him of failure, and now her lips had accused him. She had overthrown his strength, wounded his pride. He had never doubted that he was all that a minister should be;—strong to lead, tender to serve. This girl had told him that his strength was inexperience, his tenderness ignorance; that life had not equipped him for his leadership.

"You know nothing of the dark side of life,"

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she had said. "You don't know yourself; you don't know the devil that is in us all. How can you lead men through temptation if you have never walked there yourself? You don't lift a lamp for souls lost in the night; you stand in the sun stringing garlands of words."

"But how?" he had said, an honest puzzle in his eyes. "My way has never led through temptation and sin. God has put these things far from me. Why should I lift a lamp when I see the sun? How can I preach doubt and despair when I look out on life, and behold it is very good?"

"You are building a church," Cornelia had answered, "and you think to build it of sunbeams; —you don't see that your material is the clay of human lives?"

"The Shekinah lighted the Holy of Holies," he had answered.

"But beyond the curtains there was an altar of sacrifice," she retorted. "You may make the hangings of fine twined linen; but on the other side you should set your basin of purification for the sin of the soul. Ah, don't you see that idealism and optimism have nothing to say to men struggling in temptation? You didn't throw a sunbeam to the shipwrecked men the other day. You went into the sea yourself to save them. . . ."

Michael turned homewards, pondering all that she had said. It was all vague, some of it illog-

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ical and unconvincing; but she had said a true word and it had gone home.

He was so full of her that he had no need to wonder who she was. A name could not make her more of a reality in his life. She had stepped up to a niche in his thoughts before which the curtains were drawn.

He passed Jacob Yates shuffling along the High Street, and did not see him.

"He don't speak now . . . bears malice," said Jacob, and remembered it against him.

Michael did not call at The Poplars the next day. He stayed in his study laboriously introducing "the human element" into Sunday's sermon. But do what he might he could only create a wax figure.

He saw himself that there was no blood in the veins of his warnings; there was no flesh in the substance of his exhortations. He was afraid of putting it to the test of Cornelia's eyes. And yet he was conscious that her presence in chapel would touch his lips with coal from the altar.

On Sunday morning, with a sick consciousness of disappointment, he turned from Ruth's wistful gaze. Cornelia was not in the Deacon's pew.

He felt his pulses plunging wildly. Had she left Great Lowlands? Was her visit to the Nettlefolds over? Who was Cornelia? For the first time it occurred to him that he knew only that she was Cornelia. . . .

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With a mighty effort he swung his thoughts back to his office. His conscience charged him with sin, and he acknowledged that he had sinned. But the shining enthusiasm that was part of the charm of his preaching faded from his face.

The people explained his unusual gravity by his difference with Jacob Yates.

Jacob stood as before in the porch; but Jimmie and his affianced had gone to the Wesleyan Chapel, where they would be married during the week. The congregation was divided in its allegiance to the Minister, a minority holding that he had no right to refuse to marry his members where no legal objection could be made. Michael's plea that he could not do this thing and sin against nature was accounted unto him for obstinacy. Jimmie had confessed that he would have looked somewhere else if his father had let him alone; and all Michael's sympathies were with Jimmie and with Arabella Kent's little maid, whose red eyes betrayed her blighted hopes. His sympathy had done nothing but make a breach among his members. And Jacob stood in the porch with a face that suggested a spider waiting for prey.

Michael found the services irksome that Sunday. In spite of himself Cornelia came between him and his duty. And yet, afterwards in the vestry, he made no attempt to find out from Deacon Nettlefold if his guest had left the town.

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He strangled his anxiety to know in expiation of his lapse from devotion.

Early next day he went to his work at the new chapel, but he could not rein his mind to the slow movement of the builders. What had been an absorbing interest was almost a weary task. Everything here too seemed out of gear. The white walls were shamed by the block of shabby houses that intruded their age and shabbiness. . . . However beautiful he made his church it would always be mocked by its sordid neighbours.

"Everything fails!" he cried in ill-humour with himself.

He threw down his tools and went away to the cliffs. The wind would blow the shadows away and blow back the sunshine. There was no breeze—the long, low waves stirred sleepily at the foot of the cliffs. In the distance a pearly mist was spangled with morning.

Michael watched the tide creep in and claim the land, and watching he had "glimpses that made him less forlorn." The tide obeyed law; and life was under the sway of laws as insistent. Three days ago he believed that he had found his wife in Cornelia. Why should his belief be shaken because she had not come to hear him preach?

He strolled along, thinking. Two figures were coming up the path before him. He watched them in a dreamy satisfaction at their harmony

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with the morning. The white and purple of their gowns belonged to the sea and the sky. He went on slowly, then stopped, gazing at them without their seeing him. He was conscious of a new beauty in the day. Nearer he could see something of sea and sky in their faces also—Cornelia's, on which youth lay in a mist of sadness; a face suggesting mysterious glimpses and deeps; and Ruth's that held the morning and the wistfulness of twilight.

Ruth had taken off her hat, and her hair was like burnished gold above the white gown. Her lips were parted; she came on slowly and thoughtfully, swinging her hat. Cornelia was speaking, her head thrown back, her eyes deepening and lightening. Her voice rose and fell like the voice of the sea, and there was a sob in it. . . . She looked up, saw Michael, and half stopped. In that moment he recognised them. He took off his hat, then threw it into the air like a schoolboy, and went crashing down the cliff-side to them.

"I am so glad to see you!" He pressed forward to Cornelia, then turned to Ruth with joyful eyes. "It's delightful to meet at last! Did you ever see such a sun—such a sea? I want to run races! I want to leap hurdles! The morning overflows in me."

Ruth flushed and smiled. His welcome was unmistakable. It set her heart chiming. Cornelia's colour had deepened too. A happy little

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sprite fought his way to her eyes and smiled and nodded at his fellow in Michael's.

"I want to run too. I want to leap hurdles!" she cried.

"We'll leap them together!" Michael laughed.

"What children you are!" Ruth said gaily. "Call yourselves sober, grown-up people?"

"I'm not sober; I'm not grown-up," Cornelia said recklessly. "To-day I am only young."

"So am I," said Michael eagerly. "Didn't we wander together long ago in the youth of the world?"

His eyes caressed her.

"Ah, yes," she answered. "Don't you remember when we plucked apples in the hanging gardens of Babylon?"

Her gaze found his and was folded.

"By the waters of Babylon we sat down and wept; yea, we wept when we remembered," Ruth quoted.

"Miss Nettlefold is like a Greek Chorus in the drama of the morning," Michael said.

"I don't see why. . . ." Ruth looked at him puzzled.

"Because you intrude a sense of doom on the action of the play," said Cornelia sharply.

"It is the sea that does it," said Ruth. "However calm and sunny it is, I can always hear the moan. . . ."

Cornelia looked at her for a moment; then she ran past them and began to climb the path.

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She turned her face once; it seemed to beckon them on.

"How wonderful she is!" Michael said half aloud.

"Yes, isn't she?" Ruth exclaimed. "She is beautiful—beautiful."

Michael's eyes followed Cornelia. "I can hardly believe it is the stranger I saw in the chapel," he said.

"But that is her charm," Ruth returned quickly. "She has so many moods; one never knows whether it will be calm or storm with her. I call her April."

Michael smiled down at the girl. "It is a pretty fancy. Is she in an April mood to-day?"

"No; but yesterday she was too miserable to go to chapel. And yet only the day before she was her own merry self. We had a children's party, and she was the biggest child of all. She sat on the floor and crowded all the children into her lap at once. Of course they adore her. . . ."

"I wish I had seen her," said Michael smiling. He liked the picture of Cornelia with the children in her arms. His eyes strained after the purple gown fading up the path. She had left them far below her.

"Where is she leading us?" he asked Ruth, who seemed to be crawling at his side, detaining him.

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She was purposely slow, lengthening out their moment together.

"Cornelia is always for the high places," Ruth smiled.

"I know, I know." He was thinking of his talk with her.

"She has got to the top of the cliff. Look at her!" Ruth exclaimed.

They stopped their climb to look up.

Cornelia was poised on a peak. Her skirts, clinging, outlined her figure. Even from the distance they could see her face strange and stern and sad, looking out to sea.

"She is very fine," Michael said under his breath.

"How can she stand on that rock? It looks as if it would cut her feet." Ruth's voice at his side sounded faint and far away.

Michael breathed fast, like a man in a dream. He felt that he was suffocating. His limbs were lead weighted to the ground. He could not move, and yet he must get to Cornelia's side. The law that swayed the tide was drawing him slowly but mightily to the height where Love waited for him.

"Won't you come?" said Ruth a second time.

She glanced at him, and saw his lips move, but no sound came from them. He had taken off his hat and stood bare-headed, and she thought that he was praying.

She moved aside and waited for him. She

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prayed too that she might be worthy of this man who walked so near to God.

"Shall we go?" His voice startled her.

He did not wait for an answer, but pressed on, stumbling over the rocks where Cornelia had leaped lightly.

Ruth, toiling up carefully, watched his many falls, her face tender.

"He wouldn't fall so often if he weren't so bent on not falling," she thought.

Michael was not conscious of anything but his desire to overtake Cornelia. At last he was close to her. She looked down at his pale face, and her eyes softened.

"You are quite out of breath. Let me help you up," she said, reaching out her hand to him.

He caught at it, and swung himself up beside her.

His grasp made Cornelia blench. His breathing was broken by words.

"Have I found you? Have I really found you?"

"At last! At last!" Ruth's voice, clean-edged, severed their hands. She was on the ledge below them.

"Oh, Cornelia, you mad woman! What would your husband say if he could see the dangerous place you are standing on?"

"Is it dangerous? I don't think it is dangerous," Cornelia said vaguely.

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"Those high places are always dangerous, you know. Do come down, Mr. Ross; Mrs. Dawson is much more sure-footed than you are."

"'Your husband' . . . 'Mrs. Dawson' . . ." Michael repeated. He was staring at them, the light dying in his eyes.

"Yes," said Cornelia; "I suppose one ought to remember one's husband, even when one is happy. Mr. Dawson would certainly disapprove of my being here."

She went slowly to the lower edge and stood there beside Ruth.

"Do come down, Mr. Ross," Ruth pleaded. "You look so pale, and you have cut your hand. Do come down."

Michael's face was like wax. Mechanically he stepped down and went to them. "I . . . I . . . didn't understand. . . . You said . . . Mrs. Dawson. . . ." His hands moved uncertainly.

"Oh, what is it?" Ruth cried alarmed. She sprang up and caught his arm. "Oh, Cornelia, it is cut! . . . He is fainting!"

"No." Michael smiled strangely. "I am not giddy. Have I cut my hand? . . . Mrs. Dawson. . . ."

"I will bind it," Cornelia said readily.

She tore her hankerchief into strips, and wrapped them round the wound. Michael looked at her wedding-ring, almost hidden by heavier rings. He looked at the bandage in the same

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strange uncertainty. "Dawson" was on the fold that crossed his palm.

Ruth and Cornelia gazed anxiously at each other, then back again to him. . . . His white, dead face baffled them.

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CHAPTER IX

"CORNELIA, I am quite sure that duty to one's self should come first," Ruth maintained. "Why should your whole life be starved because you once mistook a stone for bread?"

"Society says you should go on eating stone," said Cornelia. "Society holds your head down and forces your teeth against it. You may break your jaws; but you must not break its laws."

"It doesn't seem right!" Ruth cried passionately; "it is not right. Your duty to yourself should prevent your living on with a man with whom you have nothing in common."

"Your duty to yourself does not prevent your living on with your father and mother, with whom you have nothing in common."

Ruth flushed. "That is different. I am their only child, and there may be some other way out."

"Yes, you may go out by the garden gate of love. My way out is by desertion, or by death."

Cornelia's voice was hard; but Ruth felt that it was the hardness of rectitude. A distrust of her own theory of duty seized her. What if she should be wrong?

"Desertion" flashed a lurid light across her

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reasoning; "death" stamped it of the earth earthy.

"I don't know! I don't know!" she cried. "Don't ask me, Cornelia. Ask Mr. Ross—he will know what is right."

Her failure to advise plumbed another depth of her conscience.

"Mother is right," she thought; "I am not fit to be a minister's wife. I should be no help to him. I'm not fit to be his wife."

She looked aimlessly about her and found no denial of her thoughts. The room snatched her away from the problems of life, and reduced conduct to a golden level of ease.

It was her own sanctum, and was large and still, with yellow walls and furniture of golded brown. Yellow chrysanthemums shattered the level lines without breaking the colour-silence. Ruth herself, fair-haired, calm-eyed, was part of it; but Cornelia's face obtruded a crashing discord. It was the face of the woman Michael had seen in the Deacon's pew—a face dark with tragedy and revolt.

"How can Mr. Ross help me?" she asked. "The heart of life is a sealed book to him."

"You are not just to him," said Ruth. "His own life is a revelation of truth."

A wavering softness chased the bitterness from Cornelia's mouth.

"It is a blank page; we can't tell yet what the record will be."

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"I think you have never understood him," said Ruth shortly.

Cornelia's attitude towards Michael vexed her.

"Yet you want me to make him the keeper of my conscience?" said Cornelia wearily.

"Go and hear him; see what he advises."

Ruth walked to the window and stood drumming impatiently on the pane.

"I know exactly what his advice will be," said Cornelia. "To him Mrs. Grundy is the law and the prophets."

Ruth bit her lips and did not reply. Presently she turned back into the room.

"Here's Arabella coming. We can't talk any more."

Cornelia jumped up. "I detest Arabella. Do let me get away. I'll go for a walk. Can I do anything for you in town?"

"You can go and see Mr. Ross; that will settle your doubts and mine."

Ruth's voice was grim; but her face relented.

"Dear Cornelia," she said earnestly, "it tortures me to see your life wasted. It might be great, if only it were free."

"If only I were free!—if only I were free!" Cornelia moaned.

Michael had been at home all day, humbled by the sense of his transgression; humbled still more by the temptation into which he had been led. He had desired another man's wife. His

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passion of remorse for the sin had spent itself. He had passed the night in prayer—and at daylight desire still looked at him with undying eyes.

He shrank from himself, horrified at the sinner, who, having fallen, cherished the serpent that had caused his fall. The sin of ignorance had been succeeded by wanton transgression. He loathed himself for having defiled his garments; but he cleansed himself to put on again the stained raiment.

At the moment of his tragic spiritual overthrow, he was conscious that he had no wish to rise. The prayer to be purged of his sin was silenced by the prayer that the temptation might not be taken from him. He had desired another man's wife and had repented; but life would be life no longer if he were purged of desire. . . .

He looked up and saw her standing, reluctant and half-hesitating, in the doorway.

The woman absent had overthrown his spiritual defenses. The woman present made him gird on his armour and spring into the breach to fight for his soul.

His face was pale and stern as he went to meet her.

"Can you spare me a few minutes?" Cornelia said.

He put a chair for her, but stood himself, every nerve tense, his foot on the neck of his writhing desire.

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"I want you to help me," she began. "I am at a crisis in my life, and I want you to help me."

"Remember what you said," he answered. "You told me that I was an idealist—that I knew nothing of life."

"I was wrong, I think," she said humbly. "Unless our standards are higher than ourselves, our lives must fail."

"What is your difficulty?" he said in a gentler tone.

He sat down where he could not see the poignant appeal in her eyes. Passion he might resist; but all his heart went out to this humble demand. She was a child who carried a woman's burden of life.

Then he strengthened his defenses.

"Isn't your husband the right person to help you?" he asked harshly. "He is an older man than I, more experienced——"

"A man?" she said bitterly. "He is not a man. He is a husk of dead doctrines and half-dead instincts."

"You said you had some difficulty." Michael steadied his voice though his knees shook.

"Let me tell you," Cornelia said. She sat forward in her chair. Scorn and passion swept her face. She was no longer a child. "I was a governess, a mere girl. I had no parents; no one. And one day the father of my pupils made an infamous attempt against my unprotectedness.

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. . . His wife saw me repel him; but that very hour she turned me into the street, without a character, without a penny. . . . I went to my pastor for help. . . . He offered me a home. . . . I was stunned and terrified. I didn't know where to go. I said yes, and we were married. He was sixty-five, and I was eighteen. There was nobody to warn me. . . . I ask you now as a man . . . as a man . . . must I live with a man whom I can't love, whose love for me is a degradation?"

She stopped choking.

"I am only twenty-three. Must I sacrifice my youth? Does God require me to keep a promise I could not understand when I made it? I have borne the horror of it five years already. . . . I am only twenty-three. . . ."

Her eyes seemed to swoon in the agony of her supplication. They were like hands round his heart clinging desperately; they were a cry for help that whipped on his pulses.

His breath shuddered into sobs. He made a movement towards her and opened his arms.

The next instant he locked them across his breast. They were iron, curbing in his pity and his love. He found his chair and sat down. His lips moved but no sound came. . . . When at last the words were articulate, they rattled on the silence like hailstones, hard and cold.

"*Whom God hath joined together let not man put asunder.*"

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Cornelia sprang to her feet.

"It was not God! Do you say it was God? Oh, the irony! The registrar whose presence in the chapel made my marriage legal, was the man whose vice had thrown me on Mr. Dawson's protection.

"God damn him!" said Michael, leaping to his feet.

They faced each other, each panting, each struggling, the same emotion hurling them together. . . .

Michael flung out his hands as if he would thrust her from him.

"How can I do this thing and sin against God? I dare not . . . I dare not!"

"You mean that I must go back to my husband?" Her terrible eyes burnt the question into his soul.

"God pity you, yes."

Shuddering, he shrank away from her look. . . .

He pulled himself together and faced her again. His pity was carved in marble: Cornelia's entreaty stunned itself against it.

The colour died slowly out of her face; the room swayed round her. She steadied herself by a chair.

"I haven't told you all," she said hoarsely. "I think this makes it different. . . . I never loved him; but there was no one else. . . . If there should ever be some one else? . . ."

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"He will not be worthy of you if he makes you forsake your duty."

The silence settled in the room as a cold white sheet settles about a dead face.

Michael's eyes were ice-bound.

"Let us pray," he said.

They knelt down. Broken, uncouth words threaded the agony of the silence.

"Lead us not into temptation . . . but deliver us from evil. . . . For Thine is the kingdom . . . and the power . . . Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil . . . for Thine is the power . . ."

A great trembling shook Cornelia. . . . They faced each other again, and each cried dumbly to the other for help.

"Unless our standards are higher than ourselves our lives must fail," Michael said in a thick voice.

"Don't! don't!" she cried. "You are a minister; but try to think as a man . . . as a man. . . . My life is caged in. . . . That hard old man puts steel bands round me. You are young too. . . . Life offers you everything. . . . Could you renounce youth and hope and liberty, and accept a bare withered duty because it was right? . . . What of the right to love?"

Life quickened in him at the question. The leaping blood pleaded that he was young too. She cried to him as to a man—and as a man the

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life in him clamoured for its completion. What of the right to love? Would the God of Love deny it to His son—God, who was very God and very man?

Michael reeled in the clash of principalities and powers arrayed against him. He knew that his decision for her held his decision for himself.

"There is no right that we can claim only by doing wrong," he said sternly. "The law is our best moralist. . . . Thou shalt not. . . . Never 'Thou shalt,' to what is easy. . . ."

She walked quickly to the door. Then she swung round, holding by the handle of the door. Her look tested Michael's strength to the uttermost.

Her footsteps faded in the distance. When not even this of her was left to him, he fell on his face before God. . . . The devil had torn him before he had gone out of him.

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CHAPTER X

MRS. NETTLEFOLD saw Cornelia at the door, and beckoned her with urgent mystery into the drawing-room.

"I've been making a change in my new bonnet," she whispered; "come and tell me if you think it becoming."

"Dear Mrs. Nettlefold," Cornelia protested. Then she composed her haggard face and went into the room.

"Oh, what does it matter?" she cried passionately to herself. "What is life but altering our bonnet-strings to suit other people's fashions?"

"You see, the Deacon won't have it said that I make my own bonnets," Mrs. Nettlefold fussed; "so they all come from London and shame my country face; not to speak of being too big to go into my band-box. I ask you, Cornelia, don't you know better than any one else what you can wear and what you can't? Bonnets or advice, it's the same thing—another person's bonnet ain't likely to fit either your head or your band-boxes."

Cornelia's eyes wakened. After all, would Michael's morality fit into her case? Did she not know better than he whether she could bear her life or not?

"Look there, Cornelia; I've taken out the

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flowers and put in a good serviceable ribbon bow that will stand weather. It ain't so smart, but it will wear better. Expect the rain, and you won't be disappointed when it comes."

"I wish one could change one's life as easily as one can change one's bonnet," Cornelia said.

"There now, I don't hold with you," said Mrs. Nettlefold trenchantly. "I've always observed that the more you change your mind, the more you get back to what it was in the beginning. And it's the same with life."

Cornelia sighed.

"Life takes a deal of understanding," Mrs. Nettlefold went on. "And I don't know but what you understand it better, the less you try to understand it. It's like me and my caps. I might admire them if I didn't know just how I've put them together with a bit of ribbon here and a bit of flower there, to make them modish, when it's always the same old shape underneath."

The girl looked puzzled.

"Don't you see, Cornelia, the shape's the same old shape with us all; but some has a flower more, and some a bit of lace less. We must just take life as it comes, and be pleased if folks admire what we've made of it."

"It's not easy to admire some lives," said Cornelia.

"Oh, easy is what easy is used to, child. It's all habit. Habit would make walking on your head natural. But you young folks are so im-

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patient. I've always said, Cornelia, them that begs most gives least. Just tell me, now, if that bonnet is not improved?" She held it up on her hand and twisted it round admiringly. Cornelia agreed that it was improved.

"Ah, Cornelia, we never know when we're well off," the lady sighed. "Who would have thought when I was a young woman sweating and grumbling at trimming bonnets that I should come to think it a real treat to have a bonnet to trim. . . . Then, all my thought was to get done with work that I might meet Jonas. Now I scheme and plan to get away from Jonas and get to my millinery. To my mind that's nature. It's the thing you can't get that tempts you."

"Making bonnets is the only thing that pays, I think," said Cornelia wearily.

"Ah, there you speak like my own," Mrs. Nettlefold cried, delighted. "If only Ruth had been like you, Cornelia! But I always feel with Ruth as if she put me in the wrong by being my daughter. I can't so much as look at a feather without feeling that she must despise me; and yet I was a clever milliner."

"We are all clever in our own line," Cornelia said; "Ruth succeeds in looking beautiful."

"She owes her looks to my mind dwelling on feathers and laces before she was born, and specially white for the baby-clothes. I'd been married six years before I had a baby at all, and

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naturally I thought a deal of her clothes. . . . Dear me, Cornelia, what's come to you? Your face is like a corpse!"

"It is nothing. I have been walking fast."

"Well, indeed I hope that's all; but a young married woman can never be too careful what she does. . . . Well, as I was saying, Ruth looks high-toned, but what's the use of high-tone if you don't act high? And I'm sure her father and me are respectable, God-fearing people, paying our way, if we can't hold up aristocratic crooked noses like the Rector's daughters. Now how provoking, here's somebody coming just when I've settled down for a talk with you. . . . As I said to the Deacon—'for a good intelligent talker give me Cornelia; a chat with her always makes me feel better in myself.' I declare it's Ruth and Arabella coming to catch me at my bonnet. . . ."

Mrs. Nettlefold shuffled the bonnet under her chair, then went to meet Arabella.

"Well, I'm sure you're quite a stranger," she said beaming; "but as I tell Ruth, it's those that stay away that are most welcome."

"I couldn't come before, Mrs. Nettlefold," said Arabella in her high, thin voice; "I've been so taken up keeping Jacob Yates away from the Minister. I told Mr. Ross he might depend on me to stand by him. Now it's all settled. Jimmie is to be married on Thursday at the Wesleyan Chapel; and I've got Mrs. Bassett to

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ask the Minister to Phœbe's birthday party; so he'll be at Cove Bassett, and won't see anything of the wedding. It's ten miles by the cliff; but he'll be glad of the walk, and I promised I'd walk with him"—Arabella dropped her eyes with deliberate consciousness—"and Cornelia and Ruth will make another pair."

Cornelia's mind swung heavily to decision: she could not meet Michael again.

"I'm not going to Mrs. Bassett's; I'm going home on Thursday."

"Nonsense," said Arabella; "none of us will hear of that. Think of Phœbe's disappointment! Of course you must go."

The walk with Michael stretched alluringly before Arabella. If Cornelia did not go, Ruth would make a fatal third.

Ruth looked a swift question at Cornelia. Had she seen Michael? Had he advised her to go to her husband?

"You *must* go to Phœbe's party, Cornelia," she said. "We'll talk about your going home after Thursday. We'll call for Arabella, and start together."

Cornelia let them decide it. What did a day more or less signify? She had made her decision.

"We'll start at ten," said Arabella briskly. "We shall be a comfortable party, two and two. You two, and Mr. Ross with me."

She emphasised the point, and ruffled Mrs.

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Nettlefold, who bridled: "Well, they do say a good start's half the distance, Arabella; but I give more weight to the finish of a thing than to the beginning. And as to Thursday, I doubt it will rain. It's beginning already."

"I'm not afraid of the weather," Arabella tossed her head; "and start or finish, I'm not one to give up in the middle."

But all that night the rain poured down, and all Wednesday it drove in blinding sheets against the windows of the yellow room where Ruth and Cornelia sat dressing a doll for Phœbe and discussing plans.

"We shall have to go by train," Ruth said every now and then, with a droop in her voice.

Cornelia did not seem to care whether it rained or not, whether they drove or went on foot. She was going back to her prison on Saturday; nothing mattered to her any more.

On Wednesday night the rain still thrummed disappointment; but Thursday brought the sun.

Great Lowlands held up a tearful welcome to it; but Ruth sprang from her bed joyfully. It meant so much to her to spend the whole day with Michael, to feast her eyes on his face, to see him among the children.

When they set out she was shining like the day, and even Cornelia had brightened.

Life was not all tragedy. Mrs. Nettlefold's philosophy lightened it. There was happiness in bud or blossom in every home in Great Lowlands.

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Life stepped contentedly and cheerily for most. She was still young; and while there is youth there is hope. The pain she had brought away from her interview with Michael folded its wings in her heart. It would be always with her, though her eyes gladdened to see the sun. Pallor was on her face like snow, hiding the scars of that keen stroke that had revealed her love for Michael. She had recognised his power in her life. She loved him because he was stronger than she—truer to the ideal. She clung to his ideal of right. It would be a staff to her in the valley of the shadow through which she must walk. The valley loomed at the end of her day at Cove Bassett. Meanwhile the sun would shine over the spiked fence of Arabella's presence.

They found Arabella furious.

"That miserable little Sarah has taken to her bed! Did you ever know anything so maddening? Of course I can't go to Cove Bassett. Cook is away, and some one must be here to answer the bell. And such a fine day after the rain, too!"

"Poor Sarah! What is the matter?" Ruth asked.

"It's just Jimmie Yates's wedding. I believe there was something between them. She lies there crying her eyes out. But I've given her something to cry for now. I've put a mustard plaster on her that will pay her out for spoiling my day!"

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"Oh, Arabella, you have no heart!" Ruth cried indignantly.

"In the long run heads wear better than hearts," Arabella returned incisively. "Nowadays men want common sense in their wives . . . And that's Mr. Ross's knock."

She flounced to open the door, and came back with Michael, who had taken the news of her detention with equanimity. Seeing Ruth and Cornelia in the room, he hesitated on the threshold, and a flush crossed his face.

He shook hands, listening to Arabella's explanation that he needn't look so frightfully disappointed that she couldn't go. Mrs. Dawson and Ruth were going to Cove Bassett, and he would have company all the way.

Michael assented gravely. If he had wished to give up the expedition, the thought of little Phœbe Bassett would have prevented him. But he did not wish it. After the first surprise he welcomed Cornelia's presence as a test of his strength. He had fought his fight and slain his dragon. He had set Cornelia outside his life—beyond the barrier of the possible. She was his neighbour's wife. There was a strength on his face that he had gained since his interview with Cornelia; but the barren years stretched before him; he would love no other woman.

"I shall go softly all my days," he had said to himself. "All my days—the long, lonely days to life's limit."

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"The days of our years are threescore years and ten; and if by reason of strength they be fourscore, yet is their strength labour and sorrow."

Threescore years and ten! What a long, lonely road! He had seen himself at the end of the road, an old man, seventy years old; but the face of the old man was the face of Robert Dawson. He had stared at it till it changed to a grinning imp that danced before him, shouting, "Threescore years and ten. . . . Her husband is threescore years and ten. . . . The days of our years are threescore years and ten!"

Michael had caught the imp by the throat and strangled him, and thrown him into the furthest recess of consciousness. And now he dared not open that closed door to see if the creature had really died. Cornelia was outside his life, inaccessible as the dead. She was so far from him that he could pass a whole day in her company without peril of conscience.

The face of the day was wet and shining, like that of a child who has been punished and is forgiven and smiles again. The same shy gleam was on the faces of the three when they turned their backs on Arabella and eyed the holiday.

Cornelia was carrying Phœbe's doll in a big parcel, and she would not give it up to Michael. The dispute broke down their awkwardness, and by the time they were out on the cliffs constraint had vanished. Ruth's face lightened as

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the cloud left Michael's. Cornelia pushed away from her the thought of to-morrow; to-day was enough.

The rain was over and gone, and the rock path was dry in the sun, but in holes and hollows pools lingered. Everywhere a tinkle of rills blossomed from the silence of the rocks.

There were other blossoms, too. Ruth showed Cornelia a sprig of broom in flower, though it was December.

"Shall I get it for you?" Michael asked.

"No," Ruth smiled. "You would have to climb up; and these cliffs are dangerous after rain. The soil loosens, and sometimes slips away."

They were close to Devil's Dyke, a deep gorge cut through the cliff-wall by the river Rune. Crossing the plank that spanned the gorge, Ruth stopped and turned to Michael. Her face was pale. He stepped forward, put his arm in hers, and guided her across.

"It's a mistake to be giddy where a false step means death," he said lightly.

He did not remove his arm, and Ruth, looking apology, saw the fear in his eyes. The blood flooded her face—a tumult of happiness at his anxiety for her.

"I wasn't giddy," she said. "I've crossed it a thousand times. It was a feeling of fatality about the place."

"Cassandra! Cassandra!" Cornelia exclaimed

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gaily. "Don't let us listen to her. She sees fate even in the bridge that leads from one rock to another."

She smiled up at Michael. He smiled down tenderly at her.

"It may well be fatal," he said. "The plank is old and rotten. I must speak to the Highway Board about it."

He wondered if the man talking commonplaces, the woman laughing at danger, were the same two who had groped together in that hour of thick darkness on Tuesday. It had seemed then that the weight of its tragedy must crush their lives; yet here was Cornelia, merry-hearted going all the way, contemptuous of fate. Here was he, glad in the sun, reckless of past or future.

They reached Cove Bassett in time for the early dinner. Phœbe met them at the door, clamouring that "the party" could not come; there had been a landslip beyond the Cove.

"But we are the party," Michael laughed. He tossed her up to the ceiling and kissed her.

"That's what she said," her mother told them. "All the morning it's been: 'If only the Minister and Mrs. Dawson come, I don't mind.'"

Cornelia showed her parcel, and Phœbe waited with great round eyes and smiles while Cornelia shook out a long cloak and robes and held up the doll.

"Oh! oh! It's a baby! It's a real baby!" Phœbe pranced joyfully.

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The little wax face in its frame of lace was dimpled and rosy. Cornelia suddenly pressed it to her cheek, and rocked and crooned to it as if it were alive.

"Dear me, Cornelia," said Mrs. Bassett, "what a girl you are for babies! I'm sure I wish you had had one of your own. You'd make a dear little mother."

Cornelia reddened from brow to throat. She gave the doll to Phœbe, and, turning, caught Michael's eye. He was deadly pale. The sight of Cornelia holding the doll had broken open the door behind which the imp lay. And the imp was not dead. He leaped out with his mocking "Threescore and ten."

"I'm sure you're all ready for your dinners," Mrs. Bassett said bustling. "Come away now, and have it. We won't wait for father. The Minister looks starved."

"Mother, mother, I want the Minister to christen my new dollie," Phœbe clamoured.

"So he will, my dear, after dinner. You can be thinking of a pretty name for it."

"I know three pretty names," said Phœbe meditatively. Her eyes roamed round the group. Then she pressed close to Cornelia and looked up shyly. "I'll name her Cornelia, because I love you," she said prettily. "Don't you love Mrs. Dawson, mother? Don't you love Mrs. Dawson, Mr. Ross?"

"My dear, everybody loves Mrs. Dawson,"

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said Mrs. Bassett hurriedly. "Now don't chatter any more. Little girls should be seen and—you know the rest. . . . Mr. Ross, will you give your arm to Mrs. Dawson? and . . ."

"Is that fair?" Michael said hurriedly. "Mrs. Dawson, ought I not to take in the heroine of the day?"

"Of course, Phœbe is the chief lady," said Cornelia, hanging back.

"Well, just as you like," Mrs. Bassett smiled. She was a bright little woman—an incarnation of health, happiness, and good-humour.

She was so bright, Phœbe so important, Ruth so sweet, there was no room at table for anything but gaiety. They laughed and talked like children for whom life held no problems. Mr. Bassett came in bluff, and burly, and honest, like a wind from the west. He kissed his wife—who blushed like a girl—and kissed Phœbe, and spread himself in his chair with a benevolent, "Now this is what I like—a good dinner and friends to share it with you. . . . And how's your husband, Mrs. Dawson? I wonder he spares you so long; I wouldn't be without my wife a single day—eh, mother? And how's the new chapel getting on, Mr. Ross? They tell me it's a fine building, and I tell them it matches the Minister. . . . Ruth, you are too pretty for a single woman; you make all our old hearts beat. But when all is said and done, I don't know the man that's good enough for you ——"

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"Don't notice him, my dear," said Mrs. Bassett, delighted. "Father must have his little joke, but he means no harm."

"Harm? Where's the harm of finding a sweetheart for a pretty girl?" shouted Mr. Bassett. "I tell everybody, 'Look at mother and me and Phœbe, and see if marriage is a failure. You may go up and down the country, and you won't find a happier home in England or out of it.' The best I wish for my friends is another like it."

He smiled rosily on them all, and Cornelia heard him with a swift consciousness that nature and love could give all that life needed for happiness.

It was a perfect afternoon, and the spirits of the party matched it. They played games in the big kitchen, and Mr. Bassett insisted on the maids and farm-lads joining them. He was the soul of the games, but after the early tea it was he that brought the Bible to Michael and begged him to "say a good word to help us on in this evil world."

The twilight warned them that it was time to set out homeward; but out on the cliff they saw that it was not the winter dusk but a storm that had darkened the day. The clouds were angry; the sea frowned underneath; but Ruth at least did not heed them. Michael had talked to her at dinner, had walked in the garden with her, had chosen her from among all the others. She had not seen that Mr. Bassett had monopolised

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Cornelia and Mrs. Bassett Phœbe. They had encouraged the Minister's love affair by leaving him alone with Ruth; and if Michael had been preoccupied, Ruth had been too happy to notice it.

She had talked of Cornelia's return to her husband, testing the wisdom of her advice by his opinion. Michael had answered that Cornelia's duty was at home. Ruth pleaded for another verdict. Cornelia's life was wasted, her strength, her tenderness, her fine nature. The hard, rigid old minister could not appreciate her. Must Cornelia go back to him? "To what purpose is this waste?" Ruth cried passionately.

"Nothing is wasted that strengthens," Michael said; and Ruth, looking up, had surprised a rare gentleness in his eyes, before which her own fell.

Let the clouds lower! Let the sea threaten! What did it matter? Her ship was coming home! Her ship was coming home! . . . Two miles from Cove Bassett the rain poured down. Ruth laughed; wind and rain were her friends.

Cornelia answered Michael's anxiety by lifting her face and welcoming the shower.

The road was a narrow ledge of rock that was protected on the right hand by the cliff wall. Creeping close to the cliff they were sheltered by it from the rain that soon swelled the tinkle of streams into a rush and a roar. They hurried on, but the rain poured down for an hour. Then the sun, stormy and lurid, frowned from the west

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and lit their way. They were near the Devil's Dyke. The roar of the Rune was higher than the moan of the sea.

By and by Michael held his breath listening. Yes, surely that was another sound—a low, menacing growl.

He remembered that the earth had been soaked for days. There had been a landslip beyond Cove Bassett. He looked behind him. At the bend of the path they had left the earth was settling slowly down the slope of the cliff! He hurried on before the girls and waited for them by the gorge. Ruth, seeing his blanched lips, cried out, "Oh, what is it?"

"The plank has been swept away," he said quietly.

They ran forward, then stopped on the edge of the Dyke, and gazed helplessly at each other. The unbridged gorge of the Rune lay between them and Great Lowlands!

"We shall have to go back to Cove Bassett," Ruth said calmly.

Michael drew in his breath and tried to speak carelessly. "We can't go back. There has been a landslip behind us. There is nothing for it but to jump across." He smiled, though his face was white.

"To jump across?" Ruth shrank back terrified.

"Well, we can't climb up, and we can't climb down," said Cornelia practically. "And we can't go back."

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Ruth thought of her premonition of the morning. Had it meant death? "I couldn't jump it." Her teeth chattered as she spoke. "We shall have to stay here all night."

"Impossible!" Michael said. "We are not safe. At any moment the ground may slip. It is to do or die. Come."

He looked at Cornelia, but she held back. "I prefer to stay."

"You are courting death," he said.

"Am I?" she smiled strangely. "But you mustn't stay. You must go and get help."

"Listen!" He held up his hand.

A grinding, crunching sound that belonged neither to sea nor air sounded high above them.

"It is coming! the landslip! You must jump!" He turned sharply to Cornelia.

"Oh, don't wait! don't wait! Save yourself!" she cried.

They knew that the earth was creeping down the high, gradual slopes. When it reached the sheer cliff-wall it would come rushing.

Cornelia threw her arm round Ruth. "I can't jump either," Ruth whispered.

Michael's haggard eyes measured the Dyke. Could he, burdened, clear it? His ears strained to measure the pace of the moving land. . . . It was nearer, nearer! Only the leap could save them. He turned to the girls.

"I can save one. . . . I may fail. . . . It's the only chance. . . ." His voice, set

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and stern, went to both, but his eyes prayed to Cornelia.

She drew herself up and pushed Ruth towards him. "Go, Ruth."

Even in that moment he saw the stony triumph of her face, the terrible exaltation with which she fronted death. The roar was closer now. Ruth stumbled forward. Michael thrust her aside: "No, no, Cornelia!"

He snatched her off her feet and crushed her to him. "It is you! It is you, Cornelia!" he cried fiercely. "Life or death! You!"

Her arms locked round his neck. "Death! together!" she sobbed. With a rush as of wings Michael swept past Ruth. . . . She sank on the ground and covered her eyes that she might not see him leap. . . . The sound of the hurrying earth deafened her. . . . Oh, life was sweet, even though nothing was left now. Life was sweet.

The grinding sound was like a ship that shivers on the rocks. With a great cry she sprang up. The growl of death sounded over, under;—the Dyke gaped before her, the gullet of hell. . . . She threw up her hands, and hurled herself across it. She felt the impact of her fall, and then her senses left her. . . .

"Ruth! Ruth!" Michael was calling her name. "Ruth, Ruth, my poor child!"

She opened her eyes, and horror came back to them.

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CHAPTER XI

CORNELIA had gone. Ruth watched the train uncurl itself from the platform; then the pain that she had crushed down in the presence of Cornelia leaped up to her eyes and writhed there.

She was free now to suffer; she could hurl herself on the day as she had hurled herself on the night; and tear her soul on the spiked hours.

She must be alone. Where could she go to be alone?

Not to the cliffs! Oh, not to the cliffs where her ship had struck the rocks! Not where her eyes had opened on the frozen passion of those two dreadful faces. . . . She knew! She knew! Michael and Cornelia loved each other; and though they killed their love, the stark thing was of their bone and of their flesh, never to be renounced again. . . .

"Oh, poor Cornelia! poor Cornelia!" Ruth moaned; for Cornelia's lot was harder than hers. She was free to love Michael without sin,—but Cornelia. . . . Oh no, no! Cornelia's lot was easier, for Michael loved her! Michael loved her! What did it profit a woman to gain her soul if she lost the whole world of love?

Ruth lifted up her tortured face. She would

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have thrown her soul into the uttermost hell to gain an hour of Michael's love; and Cornelia, who might have claimed his whole life, had renounced it, and chosen to go back to her husband. She had valued the world's approval more than Michael's love. Coward! Coward! Which was the truer purity,—love that was love indeed, or the marriage that desecrated love?

Ruth clenched her hands. Cornelia was not worthy of Michael!

She thought of her as she had seen her at midnight pacing her room, the veil of her beautiful hair falling about her, her face as white as her night-dress. She thought of her heartbroken passion: "I love him, Ruth; I love him, and I must go. . . ."

She thought of her as she had seen her that morning, terrible in her calm, not striving, not crying, returning to the home where her wounds would never be healed. . . . No! no! Love like that was not worthy of Michael; it was not worthy of Cornelia. . . . And yet. . . . Ruth remembered how she had kissed Cornelia and blessed her, weeping, because Michael would stand sinless still before his people.

He had suffered, being tempted, but he had not fallen. She had blessed Cornelia for removing the temptation from him. How could she understand herself—in one moment condemning and praising Cornelia's decision?

She walked on, whirled along by the storm of

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her passion, not knowing where she was going. Nothing mattered now, nothing, nothing! Michael did not love her.

"Ruth! Ruth!"

She turned, and dimly recognised her mother hurrying to overtake her.

"It's a telegram!" Mrs. Nettlefold panted. "I went to the station hoping to be in time before Cornelia started. Her husband has had a stroke. It's to tell her to go at once. What a good thing she has started!"

"Yes," Ruth said dully. "Is he dead?"

"They don't say so, but there's no hope for him. A stroke at his age. . . . Let me see, he was sixty-five when he married her, that's five years ago. He'll be seventy. No, he's bound to die."

"Don't wait for me, mother, I'm not going home." Ruth turned away sick and stupefied.

"Now then, Ruth, don't look like that. You've no call to pity Cornelia. All the better for him to die and leave her free to marry a younger man. She'll have a chance of happiness without him. Don't you go fretting."

"I won't fret for Cornelia, mother," Ruth said bitterly. She walked on, stung by the lash of that "She'll be free to marry a younger man. . . . He's bound to die."

That was God's seal on the right of their love. That was Cornelia's reward for renouncing Michael's love. It was restored to her fourfold.

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She stumbled forward. The stroke that had fallen on the old minister had struck her down. Already she felt that Michael was Cornelia's husband. Her own love for him had become sinful. She would have to tear it from her heart. The right eye must be plucked out, the right hand cut off. She must go halt and maimed. She was already maimed. Michael had struck her to the heart when he had pushed her aside to save Cornelia. His after-tenderness had not healed her wound.

She passed into the Abbey grounds, and sat down on one of the tombs, and thought hopelessly of it all. She had come there to bury her love. The walls of the Abbey were round her, gray and old and ruined, but time had dealt kindly with the stones.

Over the sculptured leafage the little cup moss reddened, and the curves of the arches were outlined in silvery lichen. Ivy loitered about moulding and pinnacle; and, high up, ferns shook out faded plumes over the disarray of cusp and buttress.

In the aisles and nave the worn-out lettering on the tombs kept the secrets of generations; but beyond the walls there were grass-grown graves where the fathers and mothers of Great Lowlands lay chronicled. They had stepped from the green and leafy homes of the High Street into the greener and leafier homes of the Abbey yard, and here they rested.

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The graves had been drenched in rain, but now the sun flashed on the raindrops in the grass—a mocking prism for the eyes that death has sealed.

Ruth thought of the stories that the walls had listened to, stories of love and faith, stories of dust to dust, and the crumbling away of hope. She thought of the heavy feet that had followed the dead along those narrow paths; and of the rattle of earth on the coffin; and she shivered in the sun. She had come there to bury her dead out of her sight; and it was not twenty-four hours since God had been in His heaven.

"I could have borne it if I might have loved him still," she moaned.

She sat there till even grief wore itself out. Her tired brain looked for relief outside itself.

She watched a little old woman working among the graves, propping up a rose-tree that the storm had battered down. She wondered who lay in that grave, husband or lover? A childish curiosity possessed her. She dragged her steps towards the woman. It was Susan Charm.

She looked up deprecatingly. "You, Ruth! And I didn't think any one would be here after the rain. . . . "My dear!" her tone changed, "you must be ill! What has happened?"

"Whose grave is that?" Ruth asked.

Susan hesitated; a delicate embarrassment stained her cheek. "It belongs to Mr. Dawson, Ruth. His first wife is buried here."

"Why are you seeing to it?" Ruth said.

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"Oh, my dear, we all have a grave to keep." Susan fumbled with her gown, and looked away from the inquisition of Ruth's eyes. "Sometimes the grave is in our lives, and sometimes it is in our hearts. I think, Ruth, it is easiest of all when it is in the churchyard and we can plant flowers on it, and have a right to it."

"How have you a right to this grave?" Ruth persisted.

Susan's mouth trembled. "I have no right, no real right. It is foolish of me, I know, but the one lying here was deserted, and somehow I feel she is like a sister to me."

"She is not deserted if she has you to think of her," Ruth said hoarsely. "Oh, Susan, I have come here to bury my dead too, and I have to bear it alone."

Susan, looking at the girl, felt her eyes suddenly dim.

"My dear," she said, "we go down to the grave of life alone, and when we go down to the grave of love it is well if we have the strength to go alone."

"I'm afraid! I'm afraid!" Ruth cried.

Susan took her hand and stroked it.

"I have always wanted a little garden," she said, after a time. "And it's like having a little garden of my own to come here and watch the flowers grow. Sometimes I think life turns our graves into gardens for us, Ruth." She looked tenderly at the girl's pitiful face.

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"Susan, he has had a stroke," Ruth said hardly and suddenly. "He may die!"

"What! the Minister!" Susan exclaimed. "Oh, my poor, poor Ruth!"

"Cornelia's husband—Mr. Dawson." Ruth stared before her with callous, disregarding eyes.

Susan fell back stunned. She saw the whole situation, and understood that Cornelia's freedom would strike the death-blow to Ruth's hope. "My dear, my dear," she faltered, "love is not the whole of life. When we are young we think it is, I know. But, later, we see how rich life is, even though love has not been among the gifts it has given."

"Have you ever had to give up your love?" Ruth asked fiercely.

"Dear child! Dear child!" Susan whispered, her lips trembling.

They groped about among the graves; two ghosts, new to the twilight land of ghosts.

Michael paused under the Abbey gateway. The old ruins looking seaward were a favourite haunt of his; but he did not wish to meet Ruth, and she was there walking with Susan Charm. He turned back towards the town. He was not yet master of the fierce joy that had flamed up, consuming conscience, training, tradition; leaving him merest man, primitive, untamed. By all the laws of love Cornelia was his. By all the circumstances that had converged through cen-

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turies to meet yesterday in that point of peril, she was his.

If the love between them had been wrong, why had they been winged across the Devil's Dyke to safety? It had been a miracle. Superhuman strength had been granted for the leap with Cornelia. God had given them to each other. Poor, innocent captive child! It had been infamous to drive her back to her cage. Ah! he had not known then that she loved him. He had protected her against his own weakness. She needed no protection against the right to love. . . .

Echoes of the words he had said clanged in his ears. "He will not be worthy of you if he makes you forsake your duty. . . . There is no right that we can claim by doing wrong." His clamorous love silenced the words. They had belonged to artificial restraints, to a theology that exalting the man in God disregarded the God in man.

He himself had not known the divinity in him till this fierce flame leaping up had shown him the perfect circle of God within the soul. Men called it love, but it was God! It was God fulfilling Himself in man.

Cornelia's arms round his neck yesterday symbolised the circle. He had made his leap into eternity, lustful of death that gave her to him. He had found himself in life, a loving woman in his arms.

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He smiled bitterly, remembering how he had loosed her arms and put her down, and, without a word, had hurried back to save Ruth. Fool! Ruth had saved herself; and when he had returned to Cornelia the moment was past. Only "Mrs. Dawson" was there.

But he would see her again. She must not return to her bondage. . . .

How or when she would become his wife did not matter to him. She loved him; that was enough.

He threw back his head and laughed up to the skies. He could have leaped and shouted for the happiness in him. Mirth and gladness went with him. He called out a cheery "Good-day, Doctor," to Lewis Kent frowning over a diagnosis as he went along the street.

The doctor looked up, brightened, and crossed the road to shake hands.

"They told me you had nearly killed yourself yesterday; but bless me! you don't look like a man just back from the brink of the grave."

"But that's just where I have come from," Michael answered merrily. "For the last fortnight I've been in the shadow of death."

"Hm! confoundedly healthy place, judging from the good the change has done you," Kent said drily. "But what's this about your leaping the Devil's Dyke with Mrs. Dawson? I swore it was impossible; that Samson himself couldn't do it with eight stone in his arms."

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Michael blushed. "It was a leap for life—no credit to me. We had to get across."

"You're in luck, always playing the hero," Kent said ruefully. "I only come in at the death."

"Isn't that the doctor's *rôle?*" Michael asked.

Kent shrugged his shoulders—"The nuisance is that all the women adore you for it. None of them will look at a poor devil like me."

"Who won't?" Michael asked.

"Well . . . for instance . . . Ruth Nettlefold." Kent shot a wary glance at his companion.

Michael's eyes brightened. His pleasure was unaffected. "My dear fellow, I congratulate you. She's a very fine girl—no end of pluck. . . ."

"But . . ." the doctor looked puzzled. "Then it's not true?"

"True? Not a bit of it. Of course I admire her immensely, but that's all. They say admiration is not as dangerous as pity."

Kent's blue eyes cleared. "Confounded old humbug Mrs. Nettlefold!" he muttered. He turned and walked beside Michael.

"If I pity any one, it's that beautiful creature Mrs. Dawson. Imagine a girl like that chained to a dry stick like Dawson!"

"I don't know Mr. Dawson," Michael said stiffly.

"And you are quite certain about Ruth?"

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Kent went on. "I thought . . . the night of the wreck . . ."

"There is nothing . . . absolutely nothing. . . . Never will be," said Michael.

"That's all right. Good-bye. Glad I happened to see you."

Kent stopped after he had left Michael and knitted his brows, but he had forgotten his diagnosis.

"If he weren't an honest man . . ." he said to himself. "But he's absolutely honest—no humbug about him. It was that old mother who, no doubt, wants to hook him for a son-in-law. Well, well, I wish he were well married—Ruth might have something to say to me then."

Michael spent the rest of the morning at the new chapel. He worked with a will, whistling as he worked. It was not even a hymn-tune; but he was not aware of the secular note he had introduced into the sacred place. When he became conscious of it, he stopped himself, startled—but still his thoughts rioted.

He did not go home till lunch-time. At his door an urgent message from Susan Charm waited for him. He hurried on to the shop—Susan was at the door looking out. Her disturbed face alarmed him.

"No bad news, I trust?" he said anxiously.

"Yes . . . no . . . that is, it's upset me dreadfully," Susan quavered. "It's—oh, Mr.

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Ross! it's poor Mrs. Dawson! Don't you think some one should go to her? She will need comfort in her widowhood."

"Mrs. Dawson?—her widowhood!" Michael exclaimed, reddening from brow to chin.

"Oh dear, dear yes!" Susan sat down crying. "Haven't you heard the sad news? She was sent for home. Her husband has had a stroke. He may be dead now."

"I hadn't heard," Michael said hoarsely.

"I don't wonder you are shocked. Poor young thing! Her home broken up, and not even a child. . . . Though, of course, at her age it would be natural if she married again."

Michael got away somehow. His brain turned giddily. The stars in their courses were fighting for him. He had not hoped for this . . . so soon. "He may be dead now." God grant it! His clashing pulses chimed out the prayer. Let him die and leave Cornelia free. "At her age it would be natural if she married again." "He may be dead now." God grant it! God grant it!

On Sunday morning Ruth dragged her weary feet to chapel. The Deacon was at home nursing a cold, and Mrs. Nettlefold stayed with him.

Jacob Yates was in the porch as usual, watching the people thronging to hear Michael preach. He came to meet Ruth. "Where's your father

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this morning? I want him to ask the Minister to offer a prayer for Mr. Dawson. He is hanging between life and death; and we know the prayer of faith shall save."

"Father is at home to-day," said Ruth. "I suppose you may leave Mr. Ross to do what he thinks right."

Jacob pursed up his lips. "I have lost my faith in the Pastor's judgment. I've been disappointed in him as a feeling man, and as a pastor with a duty to his flock. Maybe we expected too much from a young man. I can't be sure as he will remember his duty to the old minister. It's nothing to him whether Mr. Dawson lives or dies; but it's a deal to them that sat under the old pastor, and honoured his teaching."

Ruth went on to her pew, her heart sinking. But Michael wouldn't do it! He wouldn't stand before his people with a lie on his lips. He was human. How could he wish for the life of the old man? Even Ruth would not pray that it might be lengthened. Mr. Dawson had lived his life, and done his work. Let the dead tree fall. Cut it down. It cumbered the ground. . . .

Her thoughts calmed. She watched Jacob Yates go into the pulpit and whisper to Michael. She was not afraid. Michael was a true man.

She saw his face change as Jacob went on speaking, and her own face grew ashen, but she did not doubt him. He would not mock God with a lie.

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Michael rose slowly in the pulpit; and at the sight of his eyes wandering aimlessly about the chapel a great terror shook Ruth. The congregation knelt for the prayer. Ruth stood up, and held out her hands towards Michael. He saw her, and closed his eyes. The silence beat on her heart like doom.

"*The prayers of the congregation are requested for the Rev. Robert Dawson, now lying at the point of death.*"

Ruth sank down on her knees and covered her ears from the horror of it. Then she was on her feet again. She would not stay to hear his prayer. She would not appear to join in the blasphemy. She went swiftly down the aisle and out of the church.

The breeze outside revived her, hustling her back to life. She looked round her, dazed still. The chapel stood back from the High Street, a little plot of grass lying between it and the pavement. Its dull gray walls showed a callous face. Two leafless aspens guarded the gate and threw long shadows across the cobbles. Not a twig ruffled the surface of the shadows. Not a ripple swept the still pools of sunshine brooding in the deserted street. Not a cry sounded the tragedy of human life. The peace of God kept the heart of the day—and yet Michael had fallen, had fallen.

Was it true? Had the lie polluted his lips? . . . She remembered his eyes. . . .

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"My good child, what's the matter with you?"

She started, and saw Lewis Kent looking anxiously at her. His face was good and honest; it offered a refuge from those shamed eyes. There was tenderness and strength in the way he took her arm and led her from the shadow of the trees.

"Look here, Ruth, you are not yourself. . . . Something has happened to you. Try and tell me about it. I'm your doctor, you know."

"It is nothing. It is nothing that you can help. I've come out of my house of dreams, that's all."

"She knows that it has been a mistake about Ross," he thought. "Poor child," he said aloud. They walked on in silence.

Presently he saw that her eyes were swimming.

"I've been up all night with a dying baby," he said. "Ah, Ruth, wait till you see your child die, then you will know what grief is."

"But Lewis! . . . But Lewis!" she gasped.

"My good girl, you will build a new house of dreams; but who will give back the dead child to its mother?"

"Is loss of faith nothing? Is pain nothing? Is it nothing to lose one's happiness?" she said passionately.

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"Who shall say what is pain and what happiness?" he asked. "The door to happiness is so narrow we bruise ourselves in crushing in. The door to grief is so wide we never see that other people are going through it with us. . . ."

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CHAPTER XII

It was Mrs. Nettlefold's day at home, and the drawing-room was full of subdued voices—the accents and manners of the sewing society polished to a shining gentility.

Mrs. Nettlefold herself, all superiority and cap-ribbon, pervaded the room. There was a bland condescension about her that belonged only to these days when she received. Mr. Nettlefold was present, and his small, neat figure among the women suggested a bantam among the nondescript poultry of a farmyard. He stood with his back to the fire. Tea was handed round—a perilous innovation which made a seat near a table a haven of refuge for the timorous. Those who had no safe anchorage for cup and saucer held them with both hands and nervously refused cake and bread-and-butter. Mrs. Nettlefold's best china demanded the sacrifice.

Ruth made tea in a corner remote from the guests. Presently Mrs. Bassett, round and purple like a pigeon, crossed the room towards her with Susan Charm, and Ruth's face brightened. She swung round two chairs, and Susan settled carefully among the cushions, while Mrs. Bassett dumped herself down, cooing relief.

"Dear Ruth," she murmured, "give me a

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homely cup of tea on the table. I hate your new fangled ways—eating with your gloves on. It may be genteel, but I don't call it clean."

"What have you done with Phœbe to-day, Mrs. Bassett?"

"She is with the Minister. We looked in at the new chapel, and he was there carving a Latin motto for the pulpit—'*Through shades and pictures to the truth*,' he said it meant. And nothing would suit Phœbe but to stay with him. He told me Mr. Dawson was out of danger, and I'm so relieved to hear it. I'm going to invite Cornelia to bring him to the Cove as soon as he can travel. She is so lonely, poor thing."

"Arabella Kent went to stay with her," said Ruth; "but she came back yesterday. She said Mr. Dawson would have died if she hadn't been there."

"That's just like Arabella," Susan laughed. "Why, she told Mr. Ross that Cornelia never took her clothes off or so much as lay down for four days and nights. It's Cornelia's devotion that saved him, I say."

"They say it was the prayers on Sunday," said Mrs. Bassett; "but I thought Mr. Ross's prayer very strange on Sunday morning."

Ruth was holding the sugar-tongs; she put them down.

"How do you mean?" she asked, looking up suddenly.

"Oh, the way he put it just after you turned

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faint and went out. He began all right—'Receive, we beseech Thee, the prayers of Thy people for him on whom Thy hand rests.' Then he went on, 'And regard in Thy great compassion one whom Thou hast suffered to be led into sore temptation. Remove from him his sin and suffer him not by any pains of hell to fall away from Thee.' It was such a queer prayer to make for a good man like Mr. Dawson."

"I don't suppose Mr. Ross meant it for Mr. Dawson," said Ruth.

"Why, Ruth, he couldn't mean it for any one else!" Mrs. Bassett exclaimed.

"We are all children of temptation," said Ruth in a low voice.

Mrs. Bassett laughed good-naturedly. "That I'm sure you're not, Ruth. What do young things know about temptation? No; but maybe it was Jacob Yates the Minister had in his mind. It would be only natural Mr. Ross should pray for Jacob, who has sold Jimmie to his love of money."

"Are you talking about the Minister's prayer?" Arabella Kent came into the circle. "I must say I wish he hadn't alluded to Jacob. None of us would like to be prayed for in public, especially if we needed it. I doubt Jacob has taken it to heart; he has been low and ill ever since."

"I'm sorry for Jimmie," said Susan; "but I think Eliza Clarke should have known better

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than to marry a boy like that. It was a very gloomy wedding altogether. Eliza had a new gray gown and bonnet for it, but she was married in her black cashmere and crape, because she thought it would rain. They went straight back from the chapel to the shop, and she put on her apron and waited on the customers while the company sat down to the wedding breakfast without her. She said she couldn't afford to neglect her business now that she had a husband to support."

"I wonder she felt married," said Arabella. "The Wesleyan minister read the service out of the prayer-book, and when he asked Jimmie, 'Wilt thou have this woman to be thy wedded wife?' Jimmie answered 'I dunno; ask father!' But Eliza just gave one of her great laughs and said, 'Oh yes, he will, sir. Don't you be for fashing the boy with questions.' And afterwards she gave Jimmie a slap on the shoulders and told him to cheer up and she'd see he wasn't put upon."

Mrs. Bassett laughed. "She's a queer, good-hearted creature, but close. I'm hoping Jacob has got his match at last. She made her wedding-cake herself, and it's been on view in the shop, covered with a clean apron. I said I thought it was a beautiful cake, and she answered, 'It's neat,' but she didn't offer me a piece."

"I bought groceries the other day," said Susan,

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"and they came to five and eleven pence three farthings. And when I paid her she said, 'It's a pity it doesn't make six shillings. I don't give cake to anything under six shillings.' For all she knew I might have wanted a piece to dream on."

"Ah," said Arabella, "you shall have a piece of my wedding-cake, Susan. Then you'll dream of a sweetheart."

"When you're married I'll wish you a merrier honeymoon than Eliza had," said Susan with dignity, taking no notice of Arabella's flippancy. "Jacob said they must have a honeymoon, if it was only a day in Farmley. And Eliza said all the honeymoon she wanted was a walk round the Abbey graveyard. So after tea she went off with Jimmie, and she made him choose a spot for his grave. She said accidents happened in the best-regulated families, and she wished him to be prepared. I suppose it was one of her jokes, but it could not have been amusing for Jimmie."

"He looked dull enough coming away from the wedding," said Arabella. "He must have been thinking of Sarah. What a difference between her and Eliza! I was glad, after all, that Mr. Ross hadn't married them."

"The Minister is working too hard," said Mrs. Bassett. "I was telling him he looked quite pale and pulled down."

Ruth got up and carried a cup of tea to her father.

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"And some one else is looking pulled down too," Mrs. Bassett whispered, significantly gazing after her. "I shouldn't wonder if they haven't had a little difference. The course of true love, you know. . . ."

"Stuff and nonsense!" Arabella interrupted. "There never has been anything between them. Mr. Ross is thinking of some one else."

"I don't know who it can be, then," said Susan, bravely looking Arabella in the face. "If he doesn't marry Ruth there's no one for him to marry."

"Isn't there?" Arabella asked significantly. "Well, I don't bear malice, and you shall have a piece of my cake, Susan."

"Good gracious, Arabella, you don't mean you think he is thinking of you?" Mrs. Bassett exclaimed. "And I always thought you such a sensible creature!" she added inconclusively.

Arabella smiled a slow, meaning smile, and left them.

Mrs. Bassett fell back in her chair. "If she can be good-natured there's something in it; and heaven help the Minister!"

"I don't believe it," said Susan, trembling. "None of us grudge him to Ruth, but we'd all of us grudge him to Arabella."

Ruth was on her way to her seat when the draper's wife stopped her.

"Well, Ruth, when is the wedding to be? I've got a piece of beautiful Irish poplin that I'm

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keeping for the wedding-dress. It's the very thing for a Minister's bride."

Ruth stood still a moment; then she lifted her face proudly. Her voice winging through the room startled every one.

"There is to be no wedding as far as I am concerned. I am not engaged to Mr. Ross, and I shall never marry him!"

Every eye in the room was on her. Surprise rustled and quietened again. Mrs. Nettlefold lifted a reproachful voice —

"Oh, Ruth, how can you say such a thing when you know his heart is just breaking for you; and your initials worked on all the sewing society underlinen?"

"Now then, mother, I've said I won't have Ruth badgered." The Deacon turned on her, a little bantam cock red and ruffled for fight. "Ruthie told you long since she didn't want the Minister, and she shan't have him, heartbreak or no heartbreak, initial or no initial."

Ruth laid her hand on her father's shoulder. She stood head and shoulders above him; a tall, beautiful creature, proud and disdainful.

"Dear father," she said in a voice that rang clear through her white lips, "it's not a question of my having or not having. Mr. Ross does not care for me. He will never ask me to marry him."

Arabella's thin lips were set in a triumphant smile. Ruth passed her and sat down again at the tea-table.

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"Don't you want some more tea, Susan?" she said quietly.

"Yes, Ruth, my dear, this tea is delicious." Susan got up, screening Ruth from Arabella. She could not meet Ruth's eyes; her face was working. There was a pause, filled by Mrs. Nettlefold's sigh and the Deacon's cough; then Susan spoke. "I wish to confess before you all," she said, in a shaking voice. "I wish you all to know that I've been a coward, if not worse. . . ."

Startled and wondering, every face turned to her. Even Ruth paused, teapot in hand, and stared at her.

The Deacon stepped forward. "Sit down, ma'am. Take a seat. There's no call to stand in this house."

Susan took no notice of him. She was searching for words. "Tobias has had kittens!" she said at last.

She stood fighting for composure. Faded and old and timorous, there was in her manner an echo of Ruth's proud disdain. At last her voice came back. "And when Mr. Ross prayed on Sunday for one in great and sore temptation it was not Jacob Yates he was thinking of, Mrs. Bassett. It was me he meant. I have been sorely tempted to lying and deceit. . . . The kittens seemed to bring disgrace on Tobias . . . and . . . and . . . to endanger our dear Minister. I was as certain no harm

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could befall him as that Tobias was a Tom. And when it turned out different I was coward enough to conceal it."

She sat down suddenly, and Mrs. Bassett's hearty voice charged across the silence.

"Now I call it real nice of Tobias to have a family, and all the better for being unexpected. Phœbe 'll be just delighted to have a kitten. She's in town to-day, so if you are for home, Susan, we'll take her along to pay her compliments to Tobias and the kitties. Next to a baby, there's no young things sweeter than kittens to my mind."

She bustled up, while Mrs. Nettlefold groaned: "Ah, Susan, now you know what it is when you have nourished and brought up children, and they rebel and rise up against you."

Susan went away clinging to Mrs. Bassett's arm. "I couldn't have kept silence," she said, quivering still. "When I saw our dear Ruth boldly telling the truth before them all I was ashamed of being a coward. And now I do feel the better for casting it in Arabella's face that Tobias has had kittens. She knows now I don't fear for the Minister whatever she threatens."

"You don't suppose that she has any right over him?" Mrs. Bassett asked anxiously.

"No, I don't!" Susan said stoutly. "But even the angels have been tempted by the wiles of the evil one."

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CHAPTER XIII

CORNELIA and her husband were at Cove Bassett. Michael set his face in the opposite direction, and crammed the day with work, leaving no room for thought.

It was Christmas time, and there were meetings at the chapel, a public tea for the members, a tree for the children. His eyes searched every gathering, half hoping, half fearing to see among the familiar faces one face more familiar than all. But the Bassetts were seldom at the chapel in winter, and when they came now Cornelia was never with them.

Michael's face became more assured. If he had been wounded in his fight with the enemy, if it had needed the angel of life to snatch his soul from the power of evil he hid his scars and gave no open sign of that terrible fight.

Only Ruth could see resting on him a Hand that, forgiving, could not restore the innocence he had lost. She judged him harshly because he did not wear sackcloth and ashes in the marketplace.

Among the children he romped with his old gaiety. The chapel was full to overflowing with listeners impressed by his enthusiasm and optimism. He spoke less of an ideal perfection, but

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his gospel of joy sounded as convincingly as ever. If he carried a secret hope or secret grief it did not intrude on his work. Ruth wondered at him. Life had broken her wings too; but while she fluttered in the ashes, maimed, Michael mounted up on wings as of eagles. He ran and was not weary. He walked and did not faint. Was it strength or weakness?—a robust conscience, or no conscience at all? She met him in the town, busy, eager as before, foremost in gladness, first in the house of pain. His face was thinner, but it looked more earnest. His eyes were deeper, but the laugh leaped the sooner to them.

He did not avoid her. He held himself like a man who had failed in nothing towards her; and his attitude armed Ruth to a like ignoring of the past. The bridge between them had been swept away in the storm. The deep gulf divided them.

On Christmas Eve Michael ran in to Susan Charm's with an armful of holly and ivy. Susan was knitting by the fire. Tobias purred peace and good-will in the chair where the kittens found life worth living.

Michael lifted the cushion on which they lay, sat down in the chair, and nursed the whole family. Susan pushed up her spectacles and beamed on him. The Minister running in and out of the house demanding, advising, protesting, was like a son to her.

Presently he put back the kittens and emptied

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his pockets of a queer collection of toys—tops, tools, trumpets, soldiers, marbles, nuts, oranges.

"For Nellie Brunt," he explained. "They won't go into my socks, and I want you to give me one of your stockings."

Susan looked puzzled and uncertain.

"Isn't it right? What's the matter?" Michael asked. "It's exactly what I used to have in my Christmas stocking."

"For a boy!" Susan laughed. "But your thoughts must have been wool-gathering. Nellie won't thank you for marbles!"

Michael's face dropped. "To be sure she's a girl! Well, anyway, these bottles are right for the kittens, so don't scold. They are such hungry little beggars. . . . I thought it might relieve Tobias, so I bought these for them. . . ."

He laid three feeding-bottles on the table, and looked triumphantly at Susan.

The twinkle in her eye exploded. She fell back in her chair and laughed till she cried.

"Oh, my dear! . . . Well, a man never outgrows the child in him! . . . And I thought you sensible enough to be a woman. Well, well! feeding-bottles for kittens! I wish Tobias could tell us what he, I mean she, thinks about it. I must tell Cornelia to-morrow, she will enjoy the joke. Or you can tell her yourself. Mrs. Bassett told me she had asked you to dinner, too, at the Cove to-morrow."

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The merry embarrassment on Michael's face gave place to a weary shadow.

"No, I refused. Jacob Yates is very ill, I'm afraid, and I would not like to be out of town. . . . Now then, Susan, I am going to decorate your room."

He turned energetically and began untying the evergreens. "I'm real sorry you are not going to the Bassetts'," said Susan. "You'd enjoy a talk with Mr. Dawson, and Cornelia is always so bright. You'll have no Christmas at home by yourself."

"Oh, yes, I shall!" he said cheerfully. "My rooms are full of presents already; you should see them. Cakes, herrings, mince-pies, shirts, slippers, grapes, shells, seaweed, plum-puddings, bookmarks, apples! Everybody has remembered me. And the Brunts, poor souls, are coming to dinner."

"Dear, dear! It's like you to think of the poor things. Well, it'll be sad for you with the shadow of crime at your table instead of peace and joy."

Michael was putting sprays of holly over the pictures. He chose one carefully for Mr. Dawson's photograph.

"Joseph will spend his Christmas in the light of God's mercy," he said gravely.

He finished the decorations and hurried off. He ran in to his own house for a minute and brought out a basket of fruit he had made ready for Jacob Yates.

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He arrived at Jacob's house to find Arabella Kent rampant in the kitchen, Mrs. Yates, Jimmie, and his bride staring at her with dropped mouths. Her nose had the air of a divining rod triumphant. She turned sharply on Michael.

"Don't come in, Mr. Ross! If you value your life don't come into this house! Poor Jacob has been murdered by it."

"Murdered!" Michael stopped horrified on the step.

"Yes, murdered by the drains!" Arabella cried shrilly. "He has typhoid fever; and no wonder—every drain is a typhoid bed. Don't set your foot inside or you'll get the fever too."

Mrs. Yates, a hard little woman with a big mouth, turned on Arabella.

"You have no call to speak so of my drains, Miss Kent; no you haven't! There's no one in Great Lowlands cleaner or more partikler with their house than I am with mine. Jacob's ill with getting his own way and repenting it. That's all the matter with him."

"Let me speak to you a minute," Arabella said to Michael. She went out and drew him away from the door. Jimmie watched them from the window.

His wife unrolled a clean white apron and tied it on with a businesslike cheerfulness.

"The worse the fever, the better the nurse Jacob 'll want. I'll just stay with him to the

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end, it won't be many hours. You've no call to fret, Mrs. Yates; you must have sampled marriage these twenty years, and you're not a strong woman; you mayn't be long after Jacob."

She gazed with cheerful encouragement at Mrs. Yates's shriveled little figure, then went on heartily, "Yes, yes, maid or wife or widow, the grave is the marriage-bed we all come to sooner or later, and there's no use hoping different. At the long last the worm gets us."

She was so big and ample; her smile was generous. She turned a pleasant face to her husband.

"Go you and mind the shop, Jimmie, there's a dear lad. Don't give credit and don't give change, and you'll not go far wrong. I'm going to stay and see the last of Jacob."

"That you'll not!" said Mrs. Yates unexpectedly. "No, Eliza, I know it's bacon and beans to you to have the handling of a corpse, but you'll not lay out Jacob. The dead is mine, whatever the living may have felt for you."

"Mrs. Yates, you may be a chapel member or you may not be," said Eliza. "Far be it from me to judge, being a religious woman; but when you speaks to me of the dead and the living you forgets yourself; and I'd make the same remark whoever was present."

"No, I don't forget myself," said Mrs. Yates with spirit. "You may be my daughter-in-law though you are three years older than me—and

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weighing more than any woman married or single in my family—but you was Jacob's sweetheart, and I won't have you tending him. If he's to die, he'll die my husband, not yours, however you may grieve."

"Far be it from me to weep for Jacob," said Eliza cheerfully. "In the grave there is no tongues, neither the voice of the brawler. It'll be Jacob's gain. No cross, no crown, we know."

"Here's the Minister coming!" said Mrs. Yates with resignation.

Michael came in, Arabella protesting, and asked Mrs. Yates if Jacob would care to see him.

"I tell him he'll take the fever!" Arabella cried excitedly.

"Nonsense; typhoid is not infectious," Michael said.

"I know, I know!" Arabella answered. "But if the drains could give it to Jacob they'll give it to you. It's not as if you're strong and could throw it off. You've been pale and overworked lately."

Michael smiled gravely.

"You would not keep me from a dying man?"

"Yes, I would!" Arabella cried shrilly. She sprang forward and caught his sleeve. "If you won't be careful for yourself think of the woman who loves you. For her sake don't stay in this pestilent hole."

Michael hesitated; a sudden pallor swept over his face. Must he stay away for Cornelia's sake?

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He lifted his head, and the colour surged in a great wave back to his cheeks.

No! Cornelia would be the first to bid him do his duty, even though it cost him his life. He loosened Arabella's hand gently.

"Dear friend, I am not afraid. And you are mistaken—there is no danger."

Mrs. Yates threw her arms round her son.

"Oh, Jimmie, Jimmie! Bid Eliza go home. We don't want none here but the Minister as took your part, and wouldn't marry you to an old woman older than your own mother."

"She may be old, mother, but she makes me real comfortable," said Jimmie.

Mrs. Yates sat down on the nearest chair and sobbed aloud. Arabella twisted round sharply.

"Eliza go home, Mrs. Yates? Not a bit of it. Why, she's capital for lifting and turning. You know you haven't the strength of a mouse, and you never could manage Jacob. It's a providence that Eliza is willing to stay."

"I won't stay without she asks me civil," said Eliza in a cheery, dashing manner that didn't fit the occasion.

Mrs. Yates lifted a twitching face.

"If it's any comfort for you to stay and lay Jacob out, Eliza, I am sure you are kindly welcome to. You took him from me, and now you've took Jimmie."

"Come, come," Michael said, "we must not talk like that."

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"Talk or no talk, Mr. Ross, it's gospel truth," said Eliza. "Death and typhoid pulls the same hearse."

Mrs. Yates straightened herself, and her hard mouth hardened.

"I've give him up to Eliza. She always had more right to him than I ever had, for she's one of his sort, and I never could a-bear his close ways. The Lord gave and the Lord hath taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord."

"Mother, mother," Jimmie cried, "you ain't handed over father to his old sweetheart?"

"Yes, Jimmie, I have," she answered. "Eliza's words is true—at the long last the worm gets us."

She turned with a strange calm to Michael, and he followed her into the room where Jacob lay.

Michael would scarcely have known him again. He was small and shrunken. His sharp little eyes, dimmed, looked from the middle of a great four-post bedstead. His lips were trembling. Now and then he started, and his hands wandered aimlessly over the counterpane.

Michael gazed pitifully at him. Had this poor remnant of a man ever had power to control circumstance? Had the green sap of life ever flowed in the veins of this withered leaf, the sport of storm and tempest?

Jacob motioned feebly. Michael leaned nearer to catch the thick-sounding words. Jacob pointed to his wife.

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"Go away. I waint hev you in the room. I heard you and 'Liza a-quarreling over me. Go away. I waint die to please none on you."

A sudden rigidness showed on his wife's face. She tightened her lips and went away without a word.

"I ain't a-going to die till I've seen the new chapel finished and open," said Jacob with unexpected energy. "And if I were a-dying it's not her as would give me a bit of comfort. I've always said I'd want none beside me but the old minister. Yes, yes; it's nobbut him I want."

"He is at Cove Bassett. It would not be difficult for him to see you," said Michael.

It was dreadful to him to see the change of which the man himself was quite unconscious.

"No, no, I waint ask him . . . unless it was as my time had come," Jacob muttered.

Michael did not speak.

"Would you say as I were a-dying?" The light suddenly flared up in the eyes.

"We are in God's hands," Michael answered.

"You mean as I am a-dying?"

"My friend, there's very little hope of recovery. . . ."

Jacob half-turned his head with a grim smile at Michael's moved face.

"You haven't no cause to wish different; you ain't never been my pastor. . . . But I never thought to be cut down before the new chapel was opened. . . . If it's true and my time

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hev come, go your ways and send the old minister. . . . It's him I want. . . ."

The irony that had supported the voice broke, and the words dragged on a querulous monotone.

"I will tell him, but I can't promise that he will come; he has scarcely recovered."

Jacob closed his eyes, and his hands moved restlessly. A gray shadow of fatigue crept over his face.

Michael went from the room on tiptoe. "If Mr. Dawson is to come he must come quickly," he said to himself.

In the kitchen the three women turned disturbed faces to him.

"I hope to goodness you haven't taken the fever," said Arabella.

"He is very ill. He ought not to be left alone," said Michael.

He did not stay to talk; there was no time to lose if Jacob was to see the old minister. He went out pondering the quickest way in which Mr. Dawson could be brought from Cove Bassett. It was a long drive and the night was bitterly cold. Even in a covered cab it would be running a risk for him to come to Great Lowlands that night.

There was another risk too. Typhoid was not infectious, but if Arabella was right about the drains then it might be dangerous for an invalid to go to Jacob's house. He might take the fever and die. He was a weak old man—seventy

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years. It was a great age, the threescore years and ten. Suddenly Michael drew up in his sharp walk. His face changed and grew pinched. The mocking imp had leaped up again. It squatted on his shoulder and croaked in his ear: "The days of our years are threescore years and ten. . . . He may take the fever and die. . . . Let him go to the typhoid bed. . . . Send for him quickly. It's a chance—a providence. . . . He may take the fever and die. . . ."

"Get thee behind me, Satan!" Stern and determined he shook off the imp. He was not a murderer. Mr. Dawson's life or death was nothing to him. He had grappled with temptation and overthrown it once for all. It was fatal to allow the thought of Cornelia to come into his life again.

He had left Jacob, wondering only how to bring Mr. Dawson most quickly to the bedside. That was his first duty—to bring the old minister to the dying man. . . . But now, at the thought of his coming, he was conscious of a lightening of his pity for Jacob. The tension of his mood had slackened. The cloud that had rested on his life was cloven through by a vivid flash.

Mr. Dawson must certainly be sent for, but . . . if he should take the fever and die. . . .

He drew a long breath and looked round him

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bewildered. He was in the familiar street, stretching from end to end of the town, its ranks of old red-brick houses broken by walls and rails, behind which were the old gardens with evergreens and elms. The foliage was blurred against the winter dusk, and the lights from the windows showed red against a gray murk that presaged snow. Michael shivered. The scene was strange to him. He was close to Mrs. Brunt's house. It almost seemed as if that old crime threw its shadow across the town. The air was heavy with the clamour of sin and suffering. He hurried on towards the church. It was lighted, and the stained glass of the windows threw broken colours of Hope and Faith across the green graves in the churchyard. The open door gave a glimpse of holly and ivy framing texts.

Suddenly from the gray tower the bells clashed out their message. . . . "He may take the fever and die. He may take the fever and die," they said to Michael. The words toppled over each other in their joyful haste. They came so quickly they lost coherence and jangled together in his brain, glad tidings of great joy. They intoxicated him. He felt his manhood in him rejoicing as a strong man to run his race. What if sin and suffering were in the world? Other things were there too—the joy of life, strength, the pride of youth, the desire of the eyes—stars set in the dusk of this little life. Rejoice, O

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young man in thy youth . . . before the evil days come when thou shalt say, "I have no pleasure in them." He walked on, seeing the familiar scene with eyes that had been purged of despair. . . .

The Miss Madisons going to the church looked at him as he passed. They saw the smile on the expressive mouth, the flash in the great speaking eyes.

"He is quite interesting. He looks as if he saw a vision of angels," said the elder.

"Angels?" the younger exclaimed, "I think he looks like a man who understands better than most the mystery of the angel and the beast in his own nature."

Michael passed on, the chimes hurtling in his brain, spontaneous, sub-conscious: "He may take the fever and die." . . . Below the clamour, the quiet voices of reason spoke: "Jacob is dying and wishes to see Mr. Dawson. In what way can I send a message to Cove Bassett that he may be in time?" And in a lower deep of thought the still small voice sounded: "You are sending for him because you want him to take the fever and die."

It is false, false! The denial sprang insistent. Typhoid is not an infectious fever. There is no danger. The wish of the dying is sacred.

The thoughts swirled in his brain, carrying him round with them in a dizzy confusion.

When he stumbled along his garden path and

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entered his cottage the whirling words had lost meaning, the moral question its outline. He did not know whether he was being swayed by wrong or by right. The terrific unseen forces of good and of evil were in the old eternal conflict on the stage of a human heart.

He pulled himself together and compelled himself to look at the situation calmly.

As a man he confessed that Mr. Dawson was nothing to him but an obstacle in the fulfilment of his life. I have no wish that he should live. His death would solve the problem of two lives. . . . As a minister the old Puritan ideal charged him with sin. He had regarded iniquity in his heart. He had committed murder and fornication in the sight of God. . . .

The two voices clamoured, but his eyes saw clearly. He had ears to hear other sounds. The pulses that clanged the knell of the old minister had a joyful reverberation. It was less to him that Jacob's dying wish should be gratified than that Mr. Dawson's life should be imperiled.

He gazed horrified at himself. This was a lower depth of sin than that into which desire had plunged him. Then he had only wished for the death of the old minister. Now he was plotting his death. Michael shuddered. How had he fallen!

He threw up his hands with a groan.

"Lord have mercy upon me, and take not Thy Holy Spirit from me. . . ."

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A sudden calm descended on him. "I will not do this thing and sin against God," he said. "Let Jacob die alone rather than that my hands should be red with blood."

He turned to his sermon for Sunday, and worked far into the night. Thought barred his brain against the tempter.

But later, when he tossed on his bed, there came seven other devils more wicked than the first tempting him. They brought the stones of doubt to feed his strength. He did not hear the waits singing under his window; their songs were silenced by the voices within. He saw with a horrible realism Jacob dying comfortless, in the presence of the two women who claimed him. His dying eyes reproached him, upbraiding him with a disregard of a dying wish.

The morning poured its light into Michael's mind. The devils fled at the first stroke of day. He thought, dismayed, of the weakness into which his morbid conscience had trapped him. What had he to do with second issues? Life and death were in God's hands alone. His duty as a minister was clear: to tell Mr. Dawson of Jacob's request, and leave the result.

"Am I God to kill or to make alive?" he asked himself. "If I had never known Cornelia would I have hesitated as to giving Jacob's message to her husband?"

His mind regained its poise. He reasoned healthily and strenuously. He had no right to

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disregard the request of a dying man. Erect and masterful, he threw off the last remnant of misgiving: "We are in God's hands. If Jacob is still alive I will do what I can to bring Mr. Dawson to him."

He sent a messenger to Mrs. Yates. Jacob was still alive and conscious.

Michael sat down and wrote deliberately. "The fever is typhoid, and I am told that the drains in the house are unsafe. You must judge if, in your condition, it is wise for you to run the risk of infection." He took the letter himself to Susan Charm, who was going to Cove Bassett. As he came out of the house he saw that snow had fallen. The street was sheeted and still as the dead. A great frozen calm lay on houses and trees and gardens. The red berries of the holly were the only points of colour in the snow. No broken lights of faith and hope mosaiced the churchyard graves. Michael almost held his breath. The whiteness and stillness were like the peace that had fallen on his heart after his struggle with the Prince of the power of the air. . . .

Would the street ever wake from its wintry peace?

Suddenly the stillness was in a tumult with the clamour in his heart. . . . "He may take the fever and die!"

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CHAPTER XIV

THE blinds were drawn in Mr. Dawson's house. They answered Ruth's swift, silent question. She was a quarter of a mile from the house, but those white blinds dominated the long country road, making fields and hedges meaningless. Her heart grew cold, but she hurried on. He was dead, and Cornelia was free. Ruth was glad that she had taken the early train to Framley. Cornelia would need a friend with her now.

She could give her friendship loyally. Hope had died for her weeks ago, and she had buried her dead out of her sight. She had no resentment against Cornelia, who had taken Michael's love from her. She was her friend, unconscious of the wrong she had done. Ruth would be able to look on without bitterness when Cornelia stood by Michael's side in the place she had once thought hers.

It almost seemed as if shame and blame had killed her love for Michael. That prayer that was no prayer had been a proclamation of weakness. It revolted her. It had had its influence on him too. Since Christmas he had changed. There was a lag in his energy, a droop in his wings that she had not seen before. His smile

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was difficult now. The old boyish gaiety had gone. He was a man, with a man's cares, a man's sins, a man's burden of doom. She noticed that his feet dragged as he went about the town. Susan Charm said he was working too hard; and Arabella complained that he was killing himself for Jacob Yates.

Jacob had passed the crisis, and was getting better—but he was still weak. Michael had sat up with him night after night; and Mrs. Yates told every one how the Minister sat on the bed for hours, holding the sick man in his arms; how he lifted him more gently than any woman, and how Jacob counted the moments for his return.

At the thought of his gentleness a lump rose in Ruth's throat, but she checked the tenderness. She was close to Cornelia's house, and the blinds were drawn.

In the darkened house an old man lay dead; and Cornelia was free.

Mr. Dawson had died of the fever that had spared Jacob's life. His visit to Jacob had apparently urged the dying man past the crisis, and at first had had no bad effect for himself. He had gone back to Cove Bassett, and a day or two later to his home at Framley. A fortnight after typhoid had broken out; and now the blinds were drawn.

Ruth's steps went softly as she neared the house. She rang the bell, and shivered at the peal that went echoing through the silent rooms.

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Cornelia came to her at once. She seemed taller, colder, stiller than Ruth remembered her. Her face was marble above the purple of her gown. She took Ruth's hand, and they looked at each other without speaking. Both were thinking of the last night they had spent together, when the black hours had been articulate with love and terror and despair. The sound of that anguish had been like the sound of waters beating against great rocks in the dark places of the sea. Now the anguish had been gathered into the awful silence of God's word of sanction to Cornelia's love. That word had been death.

Ruth heard the sound of the anguish through the silence; as she had heard the silence of deep waters in the querulous lapping of waves on the shore at home. Life ebbed and flowed on Cornelia's face; and though it held the great eternal quiet of death, before that quiet fell the ships would come and go on the tides. White sails would spread in the sun; the little boats would dance on the curling waves. . . . A sob swelled up in Ruth's heart. It broke and fell back with the shudder of the tide leaving the shore. . . .

She bent forward and kissed Cornelia. "God make you very happy, dear."

"Oh, Ruth, I think there was never a wearier heart in the world than mine!"

"But, Cornelia, you are free!"

"Yes, I am free; free to love, but free to hate

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too. Ruth, I feel as if I hated him, dead, more than I loathed him living."

"What do you mean? I don't know what you mean!" Ruth cried. Cornelia's cold passion frightened her.

"I mean my husband. . . ."

"Don't look like that," Ruth said. "He was terrible, grim and hard;—but he was great too. It was noble of him to go to Jacob, ill as he was. He never thought of himself, and he went to his death."

"He was grim," said Cornelia wearily. "But his grimness is veiled now. Would you like to see him, Ruth?"

Ruth shook her head. "As a child I was always afraid of him."

"I would have liked you to see him," said Cornelia. "He is wearing the wreath and veil his wife wore at her wedding, and her wedding bouquet is in his hand!"

"But Cornelia!" Ruth shrank from the strange gleam in the words.

Cornelia smiled. "I put them on him myself. When he was dying he made me bring them out; he had kept them all these years. He told me to put them on him. . . . He was going to her. . . ."

"But it is a farce!—and cruel to you too!"

"He wished his world to know that I was nothing to him. He told me to do it."

"I wouldn't have obeyed him!" said Ruth

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hotly. "Why should you bear false witness against yourself?"

Cornelia made a weary movement. "What does it matter after all? What does anything in life matter?"

"It might matter later," said Ruth. "People are so quick to read meanings into a gruesome thing like that. They might say . . . think of it! they might say . . . when you were married. . . ."

"Don't mind finishing," said Cornelia passionlessly; "they might say I had been unfaithful to him. . . . Well, it is true. I loved Michael. But I told my husband. Don't think I was not honest at least. . . ."

"You are nobler than I could be," said Ruth impulsively. "I wouldn't have told him; and I wouldn't have obeyed him now."

"I owed it to him," said Cornelia; "I hated him so."

She sat down and leaned her head on one hand —the left hand dropped to her side. Ruth noticed that she had removed her wedding-ring. She went nearer, took the hand and stroked it caressingly.

"May I stay with you, Cornelia? You will want some one. And I can be useful. There will be mourning to buy."

"No," Cornelia said quietly. "That is a lie I won't utter. I shall make no pretense of mourning. I won't wear black."

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"You are right," Ruth said; "I know you are right. Still . . . under the circumstances. . . . Don't let people say you were not even sorry. You must think of—of Mr. Ross. . . ."

Cornelia started to her feet.

"It is he I think of! And I'm not going to him with a lie on my lips. How he would despise me! You know how true he is, Ruth. The very soul of uprightness."

Pride in Michael transfigured Cornelia. The weary woman stood triumphant in love and faith. She was a girl again. Ruth winced as she saw her. It was terrible to keep silent remembering the prayer Michael had prayed. Cornelia's house of faith was built on the sands. Ought Ruth to tell her?

"Don't set him too high," she pleaded. "He is human like the rest of us. You didn't believe in him at first."

"I didn't know him then," said Cornelia. Her smile was like a sunrise.

"What would you do if he failed you?"

"He could not fail me!" She lifted her head crowned by her faith. The sunrise on her face was like a veil of light behind which life woke rosily. "I believe in him before all the world," she went on. "Mrs. Bassett told me Arabella Kent said she was engaged to him. Do you think I believed it?"

"It is not true!" said Ruth sharply; "I was the only one he. . . ."

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She reddened, and turned away biting her lips.

Cornelia looked at her, and her face changed.

"He? Won't you finish, Ruth?"

"No," said Ruth. She swung round and braved Cornelia.

"Mrs. Bassett told me something else," said Cornelia slowly. "And I didn't believe it. She said everybody expected him to marry you. She said you cared for him."

Ruth was silent. Cornelia never moved her eyes from her face. "Is it true, Ruth? But I know it is not true," she said triumphantly. "You told me you didn't care. . . ."

She walked lightly across the room, then back. "If I thought it was true I would go away. He should never see me again. You have the first claim, and you are a better woman than I am. Ruth, say that it is not true!"

Ruth was silent. Cornelia grew pale again. The edge of appeal that had sharpened her voice showed in the entreaty of her eyes. A sudden fear of Ruth's answer sprang to her face. Her eyes seemed to leap on Ruth's mind and compel it. They were wild hands tearing the truth from Ruth's silence. But only her eyes were alive. Her face was the face of a woman swooning. The veil of light had fallen from it, leaving it cold. Her crown of pride was a crown of fading flowers. Ruth looked at her, and there was no pity in her glance.

Cornelia's words had struck fire from stone.

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The fire warmed her frozen heart so that it stirred, and fluttered up, and beat its wings against her breast and demanded love. The flame leaped up, scorching tenderness. It burnt away the artificialities of tradition and left only the primitive woman struggling with her rival for the love of a man. It flashed on the cruelty in her eyes—a naked sword.

Michael was hers! He had loved her first. He would have loved her still if Cornelia had not come between them. The bitter need for love cried with a loud voice and would not be denied. She faced Cornelia. The cold white face was the face of the woman whose marriage had withered the flowers of youth and happiness and love. Her bridal veil had shrouded a dead youth. Ruth saw it, but she had no pity. Had she not herself laid a veil over the ideal that could not rise from the dead though love entreated him?

There was a faded crown round the brow of Michael's truth; but she loved him still. She loved him with all her heart, and she might regain his love if Cornelia were not there. But could she regain her belief in him? . . .

Cornelia's love was stronger than hers—it was twined with faith. And yet, was not the love that by itself could bear the strain of disillusion a stronger thing? She loved him though he had failed. Would Cornelia, finding him unworthy, love him still?

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Ruth was silent. And the life died utterly in the face of the woman to whom her silence meant doom.

Ruth had refused to look on the dead man: she could not keep her eyes from the face of the woman she had killed. She gazed at the terrible face. It was she who had killed the woman Michael loved.

She walked away to the window, and pressed her face against it, not knowing that the white blind was drawn between her and the fields and hedges that held the promise of spring.

When she turned again Cornelia stood as before, silent and frozen. Ruth had no pity for her. But she could bear the sight of the dead man better than the death in Cornelia's face. She must rouse her, make her speak. She laid her hand heavily on Cornelia's arm: "Take me to see him," she said hoarsely.

Cornelia moved like a woman asleep and went up-stairs before her. They stood together by the bedside, and gazed down. Cornelia lifted the old wedding veil. . . .

"Who is it? Who?" Ruth cried, shrinking away.

"My husband."

Ruth covered her eyes, but still she could not escape the horror of the face, that even death could not redeem.

Was there no other life for Cornelia than the life that terrible old man had given her? She

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looked from him to the woman who was younger than she, and whose life was over. God's hand had put asunder that mockery of marriage; and was she to separate two whom God had joined together?

Cornelia laid the veil gently over the grinning face.

"You will be happier with your husband, Ruth, than I have been with mine."

"No, no!" Ruth said thickly. "He is not my husband; he is yours! He loves you. . . . And you love him more than I do, for you could give him up. . . ."

She was in Great Lowlands again in the afternoon. It was market-day, and more people than usual were in the town. She saw them like phantoms of the daylight, soundless, intangible. The wheels of life seemed to be turning, but they turned without creak or groan. Everything seemed to be phantom-still, doors opening and closing, feet on the pavements, the voices of buyers and sellers.

She turned into the crowded High Street. There were stalls fringing the causeway. Close to her was one where sweets were sold. The sweets were piled in little delectable mountains, over which fascinated children hung. It was a place of precious stones, beryl, and ruby, and amethyst. She saw the longing of the children. Beyond them, a quack was selling a patent medi-

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cine. This bottle was warranted to cure every human ill. He was selling furiously. A woman in rags clutched at her dying husband and fiercely dragged him away. Ruth saw her despair. Opposite to the quack a knot of people were laughing and listening to an auctioneer selling glass and china: "Only tuppence for a crystal decanter! Come, come, ladies and gentlemen, don't make a fool of me. A decanter I said—not a common water-jug,—a decanter that holds wine that maketh glad the heart of man. Only tuppence offered? I declare I'll break it rather than throw it away at that price! Come, come, ladies and gentlemen, happiness is cheap at tuppence. We must pay a price for everything in this life;—nothing to be had for nothing. What! you won't?——"

Crash! the glass splintered on the stones. The crowd cheered. At the next stall a young woman was lingering before the ribbons and laces. Life was bitter because she could not afford to buy them for her baby. The fat baby, whose weight almost broke her arm, gurgled and crowed and snatched at the paper garlands fluttering from the posts.

Eliza Yates, plump and hearty, did a brisk trade in home-made cakes and pies. She saw Ruth pass, and cut short a joke with a customer to remark that Mrs. Nettlefold should give her daughter some bitters; she was going off sadly.

On the edge of the crowd was a row of farm-

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ers' wives standing guard over their baskets. The big green leaves covered cool yellow butter, new-laid eggs, and trussed chickens. The people surged in and out among the stalls and the sellers, laughing, careless, busy, sad. Ruth threaded her way among them. Was this the same world that held that house at Framley? Even the well-known faces were phantoms. . . . She loitered among the cypresses in the garden at The Poplars. It was horrible to go in and face her mother's curiosity and questions.

Mrs. Nettlefold, fuming at her absence while she cheerfully entertained Michael in the drawing-room, caught a glimpse of a white dress among the trees and took courage. Once again she felt herself a philosopher as well as the mother of a marriageable daughter.

"Well, Mr. Ross, as I was saying, there's a deal of sense in common sense. They do say experience teaches, but I say it's other people's experience. You have only to look at me and the Deacon and you see at once it is not good for man to live alone, and apt to sour the temper. Bear your wife's burden and so fulfil the law is a text that comforts me when domestic things are hard for the Deacon. It's his duty to bear it, I say to myself; that's what he is there for. . . ."

Michael sat crushing his hat in his hand and did not listen. He would not have remained at all but that he wanted to see Ruth, who might

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return at any moment from Framley. His anxiety was burning in him. He could scarcely curb his terrible desire to know Ruth's news, the worst or the best. But it must be the best. The old minister must live.

Unconscious of his haggard face, Mrs. Nettlefold talked on comfortably of the solaces of Cornelia's widowhood.

Michael had spent three days and three nights in a very hell of doubt. Surely his conscience was clear. He had only done what duty bade him do. But was he clear? Morally, was he not condemned? But God would surely be very pitiful. He would bring back Mr. Dawson as He had brought back Jacob, from the very gates of death. He would lift the staff of doom that He had suffered to fall on Michael's life. The death of the old minister would condemn Michael to lifelong expiation and loneliness. He could not marry Cornelia if her husband's death was on his conscience; and he would marry no other woman.

He had not understood till he renounced it the strength of his love for her; the strength of the hope that some day she would be free to marry him. If the death he had brought about freed her now, his conscience would forbid him to take her. . . .

"No," Mrs. Nettlefold babbled on, "we never understand each other, for we never understand ourselves. If a young man won't take up his

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cross and marry he'll soon find himself burdened in other ways. Look at Lewis Kent now; wives may nag, but would any wife nag more than Arabella? And when he could have married a girl like my Ruth, too! I've always said doctors and ministers should marry young if only to put an end to the heart-burning and jealousy and envy of the young women round them. Not that Ruth would look at Lewis Kent, her own station leading her to look higher. I may be partial, and I don't say I'm not, but for real height Ruth is a greater lady than any in Great Lowlands. Don't you think I am right, Mr. Ross?"

"I beg your pardon . . . Yes, of course," Michael said with white lips. He had seen Ruth coming up the drive, and the suspense beat great strokes on his heart.

Mrs. Nettlefold had seen her too, and she bustled up, and laid her last card on the house she had been building. "Yes, quite the lady Ruth is, and I don't see why I shouldn't say it; and rich too with a tidy little fortune of her own down in cash the day she is married . . . Dear, dear, Mr. Ross, if I haven't forgotten to order something tasty for her tea, and there she is coming in! I'll send her in to you, though I dare say you won't wish to talk about anything so gloomy as Cornelia and her affairs. . . ."

She nodded meaningly at him and bustled away. "If he don't see his duty to propose to

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her after what I've said he ain't likely to see his duty though you nail his eyes to it," she said to herself.

She met Ruth in the hall. "So you're back, Ruth. Go into the drawing-room, my dear, and wait till I come to you."

Still in a dream Ruth went into the room. She did not see Michael till she was close to him. He had risen, and stood holding on to a chair with both hands. His knees shook under him.

Ruth wondered what he was doing there when Cornelia was free. The poignancy of his silence struck through her dream and shattered it. She gazed at him startled, at the shrunken face and ashen lips, and the unsteady hands grasping the chair. Was this Michael, or a miserable wretch cringing at judgment?

"Good news?" he said in a thick voice.

"Yes," she answered.

The light flashed into his eyes and flooded his face. He drew himself up with a long sigh and stood straight. He was a man again.

"Thank God! Thank God! Then there is hope?"

"He is dead," Ruth said.

She saw the flesh on his cheeks gather into livid knots. An awful horror quenched the light in his eyes.

"Typhoid is not infectious," he whispered. "It was impossible to take it from Yates. . . ."

"No," Ruth said listlessly. "But he drank a

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glass of water at Yates's cottage that day; and that must have given it him."

"Dead? You didn't say dead?" He clutched at the chair again.

"He died last night."

"No! no!" he cried, his voice shrill like a woman's. "He is not dead! God hears prayer . . . I prayed for him . . . night and day . . . fasting . . . No man ever prayed . . . as I prayed! . . . God is merciful . . . He is not dead!"

Ruth's face woke into bitter scorn. She could have struck him where he stood in that melodramatic agony—a worm and no man. Passionate tears swelled in her eyes. She could not bear to see the utter ruin of the man in whom she had believed. She turned on him fiercely: "Pray that God may save you from the sin of hypocrisy." She threw herself down on a couch and hid her face in a storm of weeping.

Michael remained staring at the girl. His eyes were glazed. "Hypocrite?" he said at last. "True. True. God knows I wanted him dead!"

He went out of the room dazed. "He is dead and I wanted it! He is dead and I wanted it!" he said to himself over and over again.

He groped his way along the road like a blind man. When he came to the new chapel he went in unconsciously.

The workmen had all gone away, but he did not know. He stumbled to the place where he

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had once knelt, where the shadow of Yates had come between him and the sun; and he fell on his face and lay there before God.

Night came and blotted out the white, gleaming walls of the chapel. When he raised himself the chill of midnight was on him. He was in thick darkness. Not even a house of dreams remained to him.

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CHAPTER XV

ARABELLA was looking at herself in the glass, turning this way and that, craning her neck over her thin shoulders to see the effect of the transformation fringe with which she had transformed herself. She had adopted it in order to attract Michael, but he had not been attracted. She had succeeded in turning him away from his purpose of marrying Ruth, and that was all. She had begun to doubt if her plan to marry him would ever succeed.

Since that episode of Jacob Yates's illness the warmth had gone out of his manner. His character had changed. He was graver and stronger. He looked like a man who had fought a fight and had conquered. His eyes were set and stern, and the laugh did not come so easily to them. Arabella often surprised the shadow on his face. She wondered now if Mrs. Nettlefold's story had been true after all. Had Ruth really refused the Minister? Though Michael had hinted that Ruth would never be his wife, men were deceivers, even if they were ministers.

Well, if Mrs. Nettlefold had told the truth there was no hope for Arabella as long as Ruth remained single. Ruth must be made to marry —but whom could she marry?

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A hearty voice booming among the medicine bottles in the surgery answered her.

"Pack clouds away and welcome day,
With night we banish sorrow;
Sweet air blow soft, mount larks aloft
To bid my Love good morrow."

Lewis, of course! She had done all she could to prevent Lewis marrying; but now if he married Ruth it would open the way to her own marriage. Well, there was no time to lose; she must speak to Lewis about it. Men were so dull, it needed a woman to jog them into action.

She went into the surgery. Lewis was taking down a bottle from the shelf. He stopped singing, and looked at her over his shoulder. "Hullo, Bella; want anything?"

"Yes. I am going to the school-feast, and I must speak to you before I go."

"What thou sayest, say quickly. The children passed half an hour ago."

"I want to talk seriously to you," she said gravely.

Lewis made a grimace at the shelf. The bottles knew what he had to expect when Arabella talked seriously. But he turned to her quite cheerfully.

"Now then, fire away; and remember I'm dispensing."

Arabella propped herself on the table and gazed thoughtfully at him. "You are not so young as you were, Lewis."

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"My dear girl, you are not nearly so young as you were. You have a bad habit of getting older. I've caught the trick from you."

"I wish you'd try to be serious," she said sharply. "I wish to speak seriously."

"I'm prepared for the worst," he laughed.

"It is this. You know I would make any sacrifice that would lead to your happiness."

"In that case you'll postpone this interview indefinitely," he said, with an alert movement towards the door.

"You know I've never thought of myself," she said jerkily. "I've given up my life to you. But the sacrifice should not be all on my side. You should think of me."

Lewis swung round and stared at her in blank astonishment. "My good friend, what are you driving at?"

"I may wish to leave you, Lewis; but how can I, so long as you are a bachelor? Don't you see you are keeping me from a home of my own?"

He gave a long, low whistle. A twinkle danced in his eye. "Ha, so that's it? You want to get married. Hence that false front!"

"I will never leave you till you are married," she said firmly.

He was grave an instant, thinking of the fruit of happiness he had not plucked for his sister's sake. If he had spoken to Ruth five years ago, before Michael Ross had come to Great Lowlands, she might have listened to him. He remembered

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the face she had shown him that Sunday morning; and he doubted if she would listen to any man now.

For Arabella's sake he had remained single; and now Arabella upbraided him for his selfishness in not marrying.

"Another of life's little ironies," he said to himself cheerfully.

"What do you want me to do?" he asked her.

"Why don't you marry Ruth Nettlefold?" she asked boldly.

"Because Ruth Nettlefold won't marry me. The only reason, I assure you."

"Nonsense, Lewis! You haven't asked her. Ask her to-day—there'll be plenty of opportunities at the school-feast."

"My dear girl, I never court failure."

"Ruth has refused the Minister."

He smiled unmoved. "Gossip, Arabella, gossip."

"It is not gossip. Mrs. Nettlefold herself said so. Mr. Ross went away from The Poplars one afternoon, leaving Ruth crying like a child. He was as pale as a ghost, and he didn't go home till after midnight. For weeks after he was wretched—everybody remarked it. Indeed, Mrs. Bassett told me she was sure he had something on his mind. He has never been the same man since; and as to Ruth, she has lost what little spirits she ever had."

Lewis weighed her words.

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"When was all this?"

"At the new year; about the time when Mr. Dawson died."

"I remember." A cloud passed over his face. "Confound him!" he said to himself. "Told me he didn't give her a thought, and then proposed to her. Honest, eh?"

A minute after his face cleared.

"A pack of women's lies! Gossip, Arabella, gossip! I remember the whole thing. Ross was a bit off colour at the time, sitting up with Yates at night, and extra services at the chapel. I told him he was getting as morbid and nervous as a woman. The man's overworked, and all the women say he's crossed in love! You're a pretty set, all of you."

"Men always think women know nothing," Arabella snapped.

"That's the whole situation," Lewis said cheerily. "We may consider the matter settled. You want me to marry Ruth. Ruth doesn't want to marry me. You want to marry the Minister. The Minister doesn't want to marry you. Seems to me we are likely to remain as we are awhile longer."

She looked at him undecidedly.

"If you won't think of marrying, it's certain I can't."

"Give me time to look round," said Lewis mockingly. "Phœbe Bassett isn't grown up yet. I'll wait for her."

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"A pretty mother-in-law you'd have!" Arabella sneered.

"A pretty sister-in-law Phœbe would have," said Lewis.

He winked at Arabella, and she laughed against her will.

"I might have known better than to throw water on a duck's back," she said with unwilling good-nature.

"Oh, not at all—don't apologise. All the same, Arabella, I wouldn't despair if you took a preliminary canter before you left me for good, you know. Are you going to Sandy Hurst this year? Change is acceptable to the maid, as the man said when he paid his hotel bill."

"Alice hasn't asked me to Sandy Hurst. . . . But about Ruth?"

"I am ruthless."

He opened a box of powder and scattered a little on the table behind Arabella. A horrible smell filled the room. Iodoform was the one medicinal thing that disgusted Arabella, and she ran to the door spluttering and sneezing.

"Beast! and my new alpaca, too!"

Lewis grinned as he turned the key in the lock after her. Then his eyes became dull and tired. He walked to the window and stared gloomily out.

It was June. The street was bright and cool with great trees in the sun. The leaves threw a lattice of shadow between the house and the

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pavement. A child's laugh sang merrily under the boughs, then a chorus of shouts.

The Minister went by at a gallop, whipped on by a crowd of children—he was the horse taking them to the school-feast. His face was as gay as any child's.

"Hm!" said Lewis to himself, "not much like a disappointed lover. Lucky beggar! There's nothing to prevent his marrying, yet he doesn't think of marrying. Well, there are great ironies!"

"Lewis! Lewis!" Arabella was at the door shaking it.

"Well?"

He did not offer to open it.

"Sarah does not want to go to the school-feast, so I've sent cook. You must leave directions with Sarah if you go out."

"All right."

He turned to the window and saw Arabella hurry up the street to overtake Michael before he got to the chapel.

Presently the procession went trooping by, Michael walking in the shadow of the great silk banner, "I am the Good Shepherd"—white letters on a scarlet ground.

The children hung on to his arms and legs, coat-tails, and trousers, so that he could scarcely walk. Behind them were older scholars with banners and flowers. Arabella marched along, leading captive a small boy. Her other hand

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held a sunshade, with which she made sudden thrusts at stragglers. Thus she rendered the day grim for her class.

Jacob Yates, as superintendent of the school, bore the burden of his Sunday clothes, and walked alone in a vacuum made by the shrinking children.

Ruth was among the beribboned and smiling girls; her face a dream in a garden of roses. Lewis watched her with tender, humorous eyes.

A cart full of buns and babies closed the procession. Eliza Yates sat amongst them, a peony full blown. The drum-and-fife band shrilled its way to the tramp of the children.

Lewis Kent saw the procession of life going by —its jest, its fear, its gaiety, its sorrow. The coloured banners, the flowers, the laugh, the shadows dancing in the sun—they made a setting for the tragedy of life. It stalked there as Jacob Yates stalked, a grim terror from which youth shrank.

The sound of singing trailed away into silence, and the street became quiet. The Nettlefolds' victoria went by, Mrs. Nettlefold's bonnet a flash of red beside Susan Charm's white curls. The shadows shook themselves and danced up from under the feet of the horses.

Lewis stood idly staring out. Presently Sarah knocked at the door.

"If you please, sir, shall you be in while I go across to Clarke's for a loaf?"

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He turned round. "Eh, what?" Then he opened the door. "No; I'm not going out yet. But the shop will be shut. Eliza has gone to the school-feast."

"There'll be some one left in charge," said Sarah.

She blushed and dropped her eyes and went out.

"What did the girl look at me like that for?" Lewis said to himself; but the matter was too trivial to occupy him. He glanced at her as she passed the window. A short exclamation, and he looked at her more closely, frowning as he looked.

"Here's the tragedy at my door," he said to himself. "A bad business—what's to be done now?"

He waited at the window for her to come back. She was gone some time, though the shop was only across the street. He watched her dragging herself wearily back. Her hands were empty, and he saw that she was crying.

He passed Eliza's shop an hour later. Jimmie Yates stood at the door. He gave Lewis a swift, scared look and slunk inside without waiting to speak.

The doctor half stopped, then walked on fiercely. "I'll have something to say to you some day, young man! Of course, the whole thing is clear. . . ."

He leaned on the gate of the field where

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the children were having their feast, and looked on.

The meadow was surely enchanted. Now it looked like a sea of green waves, with a tossing foam of moon daisies where the waves broke. There were deep pools where the shade of the elms fell heavily. Now it was a pure emerald glittering in the sun. There it changed; for the shimmer of the grass held the wavering gleam of the opal. Plumes of sorrel and dock flashed red lights through the windy purple of blossoming grass.

Where the breeze bent back the poplars a quiver and a waiting thrilled overhead. The twitter of birds, the hum of insects, the twang of grasshoppers made a sleepy orchestra for the sleepy note of the dove. Faint and far came a voice that gathered all sounds into one exquisite chord — Cuckoo! Cuckoo! The field was charmed.

In the distance where the meadow dipped in a hollow there was music and dancing. A wreath of little girls twined, singing in shrill sweet voices, "Ring a ring of roses." Beyond them a cluster of babies pattered noisily, "Here we come gathering nuts in May, nuts in May, nuts in May; here we come gathering nuts in May, so early in the morning."

Under the trees boys and girls strolled in twos; round the maypole a wavering ring waxed and waned and waxed again. It was Fra

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Angelico's *Paradiso* painted on the canvas of the summer day.

Lewis searched every group, but he failed to see a tall figure trailing white garments dreamily across the grass. It was the spirit of the place that made the ground enchanted, and he could not find her.

He went through the gate and strolled towards the hollow. The discontent of a glad day was in his heart. He was outside the Paradiso, looking on at the rings and the roses, and the angels threading the circles. No one wanted him there. His place was on the other side of the picture where tortured souls shrieked for ease, and a little time longer in their agony.

"Lewis, Lewis!"

Arabella's voice calling shattered his fancies. He saw that Ruth was with her in a group under the tree, and his face quickened as he crossed to them.

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CHAPTER XVI

DEACON and Mrs. Nettlefold, Susan Charm, Mr. and Mrs. Bassett and Jacob Yates were seated on benches under an elm; Ruth and Arabella stood a little apart.

"Here's the doctor! That completes our committee," said Mr. Bassett. "Now then, ladies and gentlemen, we'll get to business at once. The proposal is to present Mr. Ross with a testimonial on the opening of the new chapel; and it's time we were seeing to it."

"T' chapel won't be opened before harvest," said Jacob Yates, stroking his stubby beard. "Time enough to think of testimonials when we see how he fills it."

"He's earned his testimonials whether he fills it or not," said Arabella truculently.

"Not too fast, not too fast," said Jacob. "I've my doubts as to whether we wanted a new chapel at all. . . ."

"Not want the new chapel, when it's built and all but ready!" Mrs. Nettlefold interrupted; "and the old chapel full every Sunday!"

"There's no overflow," said Jacob in a grating voice. "There used to be an overflow morning and evening. Now the pews hold all that comes. It's a-falling off. And there's been a falling off

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in the Minister himself—a falling off in energy, and interest, and life."

"I don't know what you'll say next, I'm sure," said Arabella, "but we can't expect your judgment to be what it was before your illness."

"And as to energy," chuckled Mr. Bassett, "look at the Minister now, and see if there's any falling off there."

They all turned to the swing, and their faces relaxed at the sight of Michael swinging Eliza Yates.

"Fourteen stone if she's a pound; and you say no energy!" laughed Mr. Bassett.

"And as to interest and life," said Deacon Nettlefold, "I know it's the Minister's interest in the building that's put life into my men. I've never known them do a job quicker than they've done that chapel."

"The congregation has fallen off, I say," Jacob maintained; "and why? Because there ain't no sperrit in the preaching. Mr. Ross hain't give us a flowery discoorse the whole year."

"The sermons are good enough to bring the rector's daughters from the Parish Church," said Arabella, tossing her head; "and whenever was it known that the Miss Madisons set foot in the Independent Chapel?"

"If we'd had a young minister before, they'd ha' come before," Jacob sneered. "Young

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women, whether church or chapel, always shows a weakness for unmarried ministers."

"I'm ashamed of you, Jacob," said Mrs. Nettlefold, puffing out herself angrily. "As if any one, young or old, would forget themselves to run after the Minister! And I suppose you'd say that's why Lawyer Pace has taken a sitting in the chapel—he wants to marry the Minister, eh?"

"There'll never be any comfort for the poor young man till he is married," Mrs. Bassett sighed. "Oh, what a wicked world it is! And you, Jacob, that the Minister nursed with his own hands—I'm ashamed of you, I am!"

"Why does any one listen to a man like that?" said Ruth wearily. "His culture is equal to his gratitude."

"He's a worm!" Arabella cried furiously.

"He come between me and my son," Jacob snapped. "He'd have had Jimmie refuse to obey his parent in the Lord. And yet that marriage have been the making of Jimmie."

"Don't be too sure," said Lewis Kent sharply. "It may be the unmaking of him, and other people too. The Minister was wise when he tried to stop it."

"He'll never be wise enough to understand that money is money," Jacob said. "When he's ruined the cause you'll see who was the wise man."

He turned up his nose and snorted.

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"Now, now, ladies and gentlemen, we aren't getting no forwarder," said Mr. Bassett genially.

"We all agree that Jacob's a bit soured by sickness and overcritical of the Minister. The majority is against him. Now how are we to raise the money for the testimonial?"

"Collections," said Arabella promptly. "The Minister at Sandy Hurst wants a change to the sea. Mr. Ross can exchange pulpits with him, while we make the collections."

"The minister at Sandy Hurst is a choice young man," said Jacob, shuffling forward. "*His* ministry would be acceptable to the flock here."

"Well," said good-natured Mrs. Bassett, rising and shaking out her skirts, "all I say is we've got the choicest young man there is in the Connexion, and them that don't see it are welcome to sit under another minister—eh, father?"

She threw the question at her husband.

"Right you are, mother," he rolled out in his big voice; "all that the Minister wants to make him perfect is a wife the marrow of mine."

"Now, father," said Mrs. Bassett deprecatingly, but pleased and blushing like a schoolgirl. "All the same, the Minister's wife when he gets one won't have a better husband than I've got. The pulpit don't swallow up all the choice young men in the countryside. . . ."

"Mr. Ross ain't a-going to marry," Jacob snarled, looking vindictively towards Ruth and Arabella. "He's a young man with opinions

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against matrimony; that's why he set his face against Jimmie and Eliza. I asked him about a certain young woman that was put down to him, and he turned high and mighty, and answered me fierce, 'Neither her nor any other woman!' Them was his words, 'Neither her nor any other woman!' and he was as red as Miss Kent there one minute, and white as the Deacon's darter the next."

Arabella made a little bound towards Jacob. She was flushed and her eyes blazed.

"Yes, I'm red, Jacob! I'm red with shame for you. Mr. Ross is a gentleman, and whoever he was thinking of, you had no right to question him. Do you suppose he'd talk her over with *you?*" She ended with a scornful stress on the pronoun.

"Well done, Miss Kent!" said Mr. Bassett, clapping his hands. "I like a lady with a spirit."

"Ah, well you may!" whispered Mrs. Nettlefold with a reproachful glance towards Ruth, who stood scornful and silent. "A young woman without spirit is a sad blow to my mind, and Ruth has lost her looks as well as spirit. I doubt Jacob is right, and the Minister has no thought of marriage."

"Sh! here's the Minister coming," said Mr. Bassett. "Jacob's just vermin; I don't believe a word he says. But I'll say a word to the Minister for Ruth when I can."

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Michael was coming towards them with hot face and smiling eyes that had a pleasant greeting for every one, even Jacob. He took his hat off and fanned himself.

"Whew! how hot it is. This is the only cool place." His eyes wandered among the faces. "But you are all looking very grave—evidently hatching plots."

Mrs. Bassett's broad smile flashed out like a searchlight. "That's just what we are doing, Mr. Ross. We are hatching a plot against you."

"Against me?" He lifted his brows.

"Yes," Mr. Bassett roared. "The ladies say it's not good for man to dwell alone. They all want to marry you."

There was a silence, in which every one watched the light dying slowly in Michael's eyes.

"I told 'em the Minister said he'd never marry," Jacob said; "and they don't believe me. Miss Kent here. . . ."

Arabella turned on her heels and left them.

"We none of us would believe such a wicked and unnatural thing unless we heard it from yourself, Mr. Ross," Mrs. Bassett interrupted.

Michael was crushing his hat in his hands. He did not answer. Ruth saw his face wan in the sunlight. Disgusted with the scene, she was moving away, but his look detained her.

"Now then, Mr. Ross, sir!" said Mr. Bassett, winking at his wife; "the ladies won't be happy till you give the lie to Jacob."

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"Surely the question need not be discussed," said Michael coldly.

"I won't have it said I'm a liar!" said Jacob, suddenly fierce. "Did I speak the truth, sir, or did I not?"

"You did," Michael answered shortly, and turned to follow Arabella.

There was a chorus of recall.

"Oh, Mr. Ross, don't go! We have a suggestion to make about a change of pulpits. The Deacon wants to speak to you."

He came back slowly, and stood waiting, his air full of repressed vexation. The strained look in his eyes was only noticed by Ruth, who walked away, too proud to see him suffer. Her absence relieved the women; Mr. Bassett's eyes twinkled jovially.

"We won't hold you to your word, sir, whatever you have said to Jacob, in haste or at leisure. I'm sure you'll think better of that remark some day. I always tell my farm lads marriage is the only safety from the flesh and the devil."

"And a wife is such a help to a minister," Mrs. Bassett chimed in, "at the mothers' meeting, and the classes, and the sewing society. I remember the difference it made to the chapel when Mr. Dawson married Cornelia Janes."

"And how is the poor young widow?" said Susan Charm, in a nervous desire to change the

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subject. "Is it true her husband has left his money away from her?"

"Quite true," said Mrs. Nettlefold. "She hasn't a penny. I wrote offering her a home. I told her The Poplars had the room, and we the money; but she refused. She is just as badly off as she was before she married; and after slaving five years for that old man, too! Well, I've always said an old man's will is the devil's will, and so it's proved."

Michael moved away and spoke to the Deacon, but he found himself listening to the women's conversation.

"She seems to have taken a dislike to Great Lowlands," said Susan Charm. "When her husband died I offered her a share in the business; but perhaps there wasn't enough to tempt her. Wools don't attract the young, though I find them bright and companionable myself."

"How she's to live, I don't know," said Mrs. Nettlefold. "Do you know if there is any fund to help Mrs. Dawson, Mr. Ross? She's quite a pauper, and won't take help from her friends."

"I have heard nothing. I had no idea," Michael said.

His voice shook. Even Mr. Bassett noticed the livid whiteness of his face. He turned from them abruptly, and the women gazed after him with disturbed faces.

"Whatever has upset him so? I never saw the Minister vexed before," said Mrs. Nettlefold.

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"He wasn't over pleased about the change of pulpits," her husband answered. "I couldn't get yea or nay from him."

Michael strode across the grass, deaf to the children calling him. The only voice he heard was Cornelia's. She was "a pauper" and friendless, and he had deserted her. His conscience had told him that it was his duty to put away the thought of marrying her; but now, what duty was clearer than the duty of helping in her need the woman he loved? She must come to him, to share his home and his work. Mrs. Bassett was right; the Church needed the minister's wife; and he needed a wife to make his work among these people possible. Their vulgarity was intolerable. The chains of his ministry galled him. He understood why she had not come to Great Lowlands. She would not force herself on his notice. Perhaps she was waiting for him to write to her.

He walked rapidly across the meadows until he reached the bare headland of cliff. The sea was before him, shining and placid; a fleet of winged fishing-boats poised becalmed, ready for flight. In the skies the clouds stretched in lines, flashing silver and gold, like ranks of armed men. Below them the horizon belt was a molten glory.

Michael could hear deep down under him the sob of forsaken waters in the darkness of the caves, but the sound was meaningless in that glittering panoply of sunset. He walked on. It

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was the same cliff on which he had walked with Cornelia, and the old sensations came thronging back—the joy of life which he had drank like wine that mad November morning; the buffet of the wind that had whipped on his pursuit of Cornelia, the panting chase to the summit, and Ruth's voice speaking doom. . . .

He felt again the first onset of temptation, the desire to snatch Cornelia to him though he sinned against heaven and earth. Then came the horror of himself and the lonely anguish of his cry. "Depart from me, O God, for I am a man of unclean lips."

In those days and nights when he had wrestled with the tempter, God had not departed from him. It was God who had strengthened him to put away from his life and his heart the love that sin had purchased. The death of Robert Dawson did not lie at his door; but he had wished for his death, and in the sight of God he was a murderer at heart. Our sin must touch those we love before we know the bitterness of the wages of sin. Michael had sternly accepted the punishment of his guilt, and renouncing the thought of love had turned back with a humble and a contrite heart to minister to his people.

But now Cornelia's loneliness and suffering pierced him. Had he any moral right to crush her life in his downfall? Had he any moral right to link her innocence with his guilt? He could not doubt that sin lay at his door. The

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rigid rule of his Northern training condemned him.

He fought his fight again. But now the weary body dominated the soul; right and wrong were blurred in his mind. Mists of doubt rose up, hiding the path that he ought to take.

He lifted his eyes appealing, and the sea showed him a face gray, cold, relentless. The shining ranks of armed rays had marched through the gates of evening. The boats had furled their sails and floated out on the tide. Up from the caves came the deep sob of forsaken waters.

Other sounds rose to him, a distant melody fine and delicate like a breath of flowers—the voices of the children singing in the meadows—

> "Lead, kindly Light, amid the encircling gloom,
> Lead Thou me on."

The melody bore the words to him where he stood with hopeless eyes gazing at the pitiless face of the sea and the deserted skies.

As he crossed the meadow, a gray, gaunt figure, ghost-like among the mists, came out to meet him. The thin voice of Arabella pierced like a stiletto to his brain.

"I hear you are going to exchange pulpits with Mr. Krupp, at Sandy Hurst, Mr. Ross. My sister Alice lives there. I am sure she will invite you to stay at her house."

"Mr. Krupp—Sandy Hurst? I don't understand." Michael passed his hand over his fore-

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head and looked at her bewildered. "Ah, yes, I remember. The Deacon said something about it, but it is not decided."

"Oh, of course you will go," she said; "you need a change. You will come back to Great Lowlands with fresh ideas and new feelings to find us all ready to welcome you heartily."

He stopped. "Fresh ideas and new feelings?" he repeated vaguely. "Yes, you are right; you are right. I must get away from myself if I'm ever to find peace again."

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CHAPTER XVII

AUGUST had come, and Michael must go back to Great Lowlands. He had been a month at Sandy Hurst, wandering in a paradise of roses. The paradise had its serpent in Arabella Kent, but even her presence had not spoiled it for Michael.

Arabella's sister had invited him to stay at her house, and he found himself suddenly snatched from the struggles, the smallness, the sordidness of his life at Great Lowlands into an atmosphere of culture and peace.

The Blakes lived in an old country house, shut in by trees and lawns from the life of the village which flowed past its gates into the great black town of Liverpool. Michael spent most of his day among the trees and flowers.

"You look worn out," Mrs. Blake said when he came; "you have been working too hard."

"No, I have not been working;" he pushed his hair from his forehead and looked at her with eyes that moved her. "But I am tired of life."

"You are too young to be tired of life," she smiled.

"I am tired of problems, and sin, and suffering, and people. I only want to lie in the sun and watch the grass grow."

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"You shall do what you like; and when the grass bores you, come and play with baby and me."

She smiled into his gloomy eyes, then lifted the toddling fat baby and held her close. "See, this is my life. It is full of problems and I am not tired of it."

It was the same attitude in which Cornelia had stood holding the doll that day at Cove Bassett. He turned away with a bitter smile. An angel with a flaming sword barred his way into the garden of life.

He had left Great Lowlands feeling that his conscience prevented him from marrying Cornelia. He was unworthy of her, and he had renounced happiness in order to find peace. But the emptiness in his heart was intolerable. He must get away from men, not to brood over his lost joy, but to brace himself for the real work of life. The new chapel would be opened at the fall of the year. He would begin his ministry again where no memory of Cornelia would sting him to remembrance of his sin.

But as the days passed at Sandy Hurst the sight of the child and mother woke in him the hard yearning of nature. The baby's hand in his tugged at his heart. The smiling woman made him remember another woman, heavy-eyed and sad. To escape from the thought of Cornelia he buried himself in the garden and attacked a heavy theological work. It wearied his

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brain and did not satisfy his heart. For the first time in his life doctrines and dogma seemed to him like barbed wire fences closing in the mind from liberty.

He was frowning over his book one morning when Alice Blake interrupted him.

"You should give yourself a holiday from theology. It only worries you. Let me take that book away and bring another."

He handed the book to her without a protest, and she gave him one she had been reading.

Michael turned the leaves listlessly. He was in the mood when it was as irksome to do one thing as another. Then his eyes settled on the page—

"Oh, Thou hast shattered to bits my Jar of Wine, my Lord!
Thou hast shut me out from the Gladness that was mine, my Lord!
Thou hast spilt and scattered my Wine upon the Clay.
Oh, dust in my mouth! if the Drunkness be not Thine, my Lord!"

He threw himself on the grass, and in an instant was under the spell of the Persian. He turned the pages feverishly. Who was this man that wrote what he felt; that gave a voice to all the doubt and yearning in his heart?

At this moment when theology held nothing for him, when the strait bonds of his creed were cutting into his very life, here was a voice crying in the wilderness preparing the way of that

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God who is higher than all creed, deeper than all love.

"And this I know; whether the one True Light
Kindle to Love, or Wrath consume me quite
One Glimpse of it within the Tavern caught
Better than in the Temple lost outright." . . .

He turned the pages, and drank like a thirsty man from every cup of verse.

"Alike for those who for To-day prepare,
And those that after a To-morrow stare,
A Muezzin from the Tower of Darkness cries
'Fools! your Reward is neither here nor there.' . . .

"I sent my Soul through the Invisible
Some Letter of that after Life to spell:
And by and by my Soul return'd to me,
And answered 'I myself am Heav'n and Hell.'"

Every day Michael read Omar Khayyám under the roses; at first attracted by the philosophy. But soon the charm of the roses was woven round him, and his senses were steeped in wine and the lust of life. He crept out of his strait shell of dogma, and lay cowering in his liberty and weakness. Then his fibres toughened, and he faced his new life armed to meet it. Health came back to his body and brain. His eyes lost their hopelessness; his heart bounded each day to meet the sun. The healthy man dominated the morbid conscience. The minister was lost in the man.

It is doubtful if the change were all gain. He

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had lost his simplicity, and the sturdiness of aim that had given him force. His life, turning on its pivot of doctrine, had been upright and coherent, if restricted. Now it needed direction. His pleasure in his work among the people had left him. Only his pleasure in his preaching remained.

On Sundays he looked down on a sea of faces as eager, as enthusiastic, as the first congregations at Great Lowlands. With an infinite relief he missed the cold criticism of Jacob Yates, the disturbing quiet of Ruth Nettlefold. He had thrown aside the humility and penitence that had sheathed his energy. His boyish assurance swept about him like a glittering blade.

Not even Arabella's face, sharp against the background of the Blake pew, disturbed him.

She had appeared at Sandy Hurst the week after his arrival; but by that time he had found out the secret nooks of the garden, and Arabella was too busy in arranging her sister's house to trouble him.

If Michael had ever dreamed of finding a wife in Arabella, the contrast between the sisters would have dispelled the dream.

Alice Blake was ten years younger than Arabella, bright in manner, gentle and cultured. After a fortnight of her presence, that, and the spell of roses, began to make Michael realise how bare and ugly were the lives lived in Great Lowlands.

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The Nettlefolds were the "best people" of the chapel; and Mrs. Nettlefold's carpets and bonnets and accent were intolerable. Jacob Yates was a file rasping his nerves. He remembered Arabella's ambitions, and shuddered. If his home had offered a contrast to these crudities he could have thought of them more tolerably; but the little tree-shadowed cottage was empty and dull. He imagined a woman's presence in it, the sound of a child's laugh, and his heart withered.

He strove to comfort himself with the idea of the new chapel, but this even had lost its interest; the walls were hard and cold, they offered no rest to human longing. He thought of the fisher folk, and their stern patience deterred him; of the villagers, and they were all narrow and vulgar.

He forgot to remember what had once delighted him, the fine outlines of life at Great Lowlands, the elemental force set against the background of cliff and sea; the splendid drama of life and death acted without art, simply, inevitably, on the stage of the soul. In his impatience he would not see its heroic proportions. The breath of the roses seemed to him more desirable than the salt smell of the sea.

He would have been glad to forget that he must return to Great Lowlands, but Arabella's presence was a constant reminder. She had plotted and planned that they should be together

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at her sister's, but nearness had only driven Michael farther from her. When she talked of the new chapel he turned wearily from her. There was no common interest of sick people to draw them together here, and she seemed to have no other interest for him.

The knowledge came home to her at last; and if it pierced her she bore her wound stoically, and thought with satisfaction that her stay in the same house with Michael must have maddened Mrs. Nettlefold.

She would go back to Great Lowlands as she came, but who was to know what had happened at Sandy Hurst? A reluctant hint, a charged reticence, a regretful silence would say much. And as for herself, she had never looked on marriage as the only possible goal for woman. Life was full enough and absorbing enough to satisfy all her emotions. It was only girls like Sarah that considered love at all. It suited her plan to return home abruptly and unexpectedly two days before Michael's visit was to end. She would not explain why she had not remained to travel back with him; and Mrs. Nettlefold would still writhe on the horns of anxiety.

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CHAPTER XVIII

On his way to Liverpool the following Monday Michael's thoughts were full of the home he had left. He seemed to have bidden good-bye to the charm and joyousness of life.

To exchange Sandy Hurst for Great Lowlands was like exchanging Omar Khayyám for the dull-faced books in his study. They did not interest him to-day.

Puritanism had become too narrow for him. There was something harsh in the conduct of life to which he had been trained. It was good and useful, he knew; and from such rough fibre men wove strong and splendid lives; but he felt the prick of the horsehair. He had done with a horsehair dogmatism. The soft raiment of the King's house of nature was there to cover his nakedness.

It seemed to him that his eyes had been opened to see a more strenuous manhood. Remorse was an opiate that drugged action. Let the dead past bury its dead that the present might step onward unencumbered. He would weave his web at the loom of life; but now the strands should be of gold and rose and purple, dominating the black threads of sin and terror. He could not discard the fabric already woven, but a

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flaw at the outset need not spoil the whole design. What garment of life could bear the test of perfection? Men had once cast lots for a coat woven without seam, but that had been the robe of Divinity. There must needs be knots and tangles and dark lines in the web woven by human lives, for circumstance and frailty were threads in the loom. But now the pattern should gleam with hope and beauty and faith in ultimate good.

When he alighted from the train at Liverpool he was so deep in thought he did not notice the other passengers. He had to wait for the train to Great Lowlands; and he walked up and down the platform seeing nothing but his own problem.

With his keen, pleasant face and absorbed manner he struck a distinctive note in the eager hurrying crowd. More than one spared a glance at him in the midst of his own bustle.

One woman, whose eyes followed Michael wherever he went, seemed to be hesitating as to whether she should speak to him or not. Once or twice she moved towards him, then hid herself again in the crowd. Suddenly she went close to him and touched his arm.

"My train is due; I should like to say good-bye."

Her voice was even and round, but it was the evenness and roundness of the wave that at any moment may be shattered into mist.

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Michael turned courteously as she spoke, his hand half-lifted to his hat. It was Cornelia.

His hand dropped to his side, he stepped back, his face covered with dismayed confusion. Seeing it, Cornelia drew herself up proudly and waited for him to speak, her face so still and changed that Michael half-believed that he was looking at a stranger. He did not take his eyes from her, but no words passed his white lips. A fierce yearning fought with the dismay in his eyes, a hopelessness and fear that stunned Cornelia's pride. She forgot her hurt at his reception. Her heart ran swiftly to answer his dumb cry to it.

He was looking at her as a man might look at one that was dead and is alive again. He had crucified his love, but from the place where he had buried it, it had risen to prove itself a living love by the very wounds with which he had wounded it.

Cornelia saw and understood. They read each other's faces, then turned together and walked to the deserted end of the platform.

There Michael put out a trembling hand.

"It is you, Cornelia." His voice shook too.

"I wanted to say good-bye . . . to say good-bye," she half sobbed.

"There's no good-bye again," he said slowly. "God has given you to me by this meeting."

"No, no," she gasped. "I did it. I knew you were at Sandy Hurst. . . . I went . . .

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to see your face once more. . . . I came back . . . in the same train with you. . . . I didn't mean to speak . . . but you were here. . . . And I sail for Canada to-day."

The sentences fell breathlessly, a strangled silence between each.

"You went . . . because I love you," Michael said in a frightened whisper.

"And because I love you," she said, lifting her head proudly.

"You are going to Canada?" There was a vague wonder in his manner.

"I was—I had nothing to keep me here. I had to find work."

The sound in her voice was like the sound of the wind sweeping among dead leaves.

"But yet . . . you knew I loved you!" he said hoarsely.

"Then why? . . . then why?" She lifted her worn eyes and they accused him of a wilful silence. Pain had marred her beauty. The months of doubt had seared her youth. He had never taken his eyes away from her; and a look like a flame leaped to meet her accusation.

He gave a short, incoherent laugh.

"Why have I been silent?"

> "Ah, my Belovèd, fill the Cup that clears
> To-day of past Regret and future Fears."

He took her hand and held it. "Why? How do I know—now that I have found my wife?"

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Cornelia gazed at him with eyes that wondered and yet were not afraid. His fear had passed. Fire kindled more fire in his eyes, and the flame consumed the doubt that had tortured her.

He answered her look with an exulting, "For this my love was dead and is alive again. She was lost and is found."

"I was hiding from myself," she cried, "and I thought you would find me if . . . if you cared."

"If I cared!" he laughed.

Holding each other's hands like children they stumbled to the seat at the end of the platform. A train clamoured into the station.

"My train for the docks," Cornelia whispered.

His hold tightened. "No, no; you are mine now."

She laughed triumphantly. "I've always been yours . . . even before. . . . But I told my husband."

He dropped her hand, and she saw the old fear shiver the shine in his eyes.

"We must be married at once," he said abruptly.

"At once? It is impossible!" she said bewildered.

"It must be at once," he said sternly. "We must go to Great Lowlands man and wife; and I must be there on Sunday."

"This week!" she cried, shrinking. "It is too

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soon. . . . We are not even engaged," she added, with a little tender smile.

The smile fluttered across his silence like a moth across a flame, and shriveled and died. Cornelia gazed at him, her lips still parted, wonder growing on her face. Michael's glance was set in a determination cold and hard as flint.

"If I go back to Great Lowlands unmarried the old doubt will return, and I shall not dare to take her," he was thinking.

"I dare not wait," he said aloud. "I'm afraid! I'm afraid!"

His cry startled her still more, and he became aware of her surprise. He turned to her, gravely tender.

"Little one, I'm frightened lest I lose you again."

"I'm not afraid," she said. "If we love each other we can never lose each other."

"I have loved you always, and I'm afraid, Cornelia. Joy makes men cowards."

"It makes me brave, as your love made me brave to go back to my terrible life. Your truth and goodness helped me. . . . Oh, I am glad that you are stronger than I!—that your life is an ideal of right!"

"Stronger than you!" he groaned. "An ideal of right! Little you know. . . . How can you know a man's weakness?"

He got up and walked the platform restlessly. By and by he came back to her.

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"How hot and noisy the station is! Let us get away."

She rose at once. "Where shall we go?" Her voice was weary. Tears had gathered and blotted out Michael's figure. This meeting was so different from the meeting of triumphant love. She could not understand him. He was not like a man who had found a lost love. His face was strained; his forehead lined, and damp with moisture. His glance avoided her. He seemed to be struggling in the coils of some evil fate.

"If we love each other we can never lose each other," he said to himself. He pushed the damp hair from his forehead.

"Cornelia, can you trust my love?" There was a strange appeal in his voice.

"To death," she answered. She could not understand his mood, but her faith in him remained.

"I want to explain my silence—all these months," he said, turning away his eyes from her.

"No," she said quickly. "Don't tell me anything. I know you had good reason."

He was doubtful a minute. Need he destroy her faith in him? Must he put her love to that supreme test? It was the rigid rule of his Puritanism that bade him confess his sin to her. The past had buried its dead. Only the present was hers—the present that held the unstained life of the future.

He set the temptation from him. He would

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not build their lives on a foundation of falsehood. If she married him it must be knowing what manner of man he was. Her faith in him demanded the truth.

"I must tell you this," he said hoarsely. "I am not worthy of your love. I've sinned against Heaven and before you. All these months I have not dared to ask you to share my guilt. . . ."

He stopped. The hopelessness in his voice, his bent head, gave him an appealing dignity that went to Cornelia's heart. His humiliation was at once proud and pathetic.

"I dare not let you share it now unless you know," he added in a hushed, stern voice. "In the sight of God I am a murderer. I wished your husband to die. It was through me he visited Yates and took the fever. . . . I prayed for his life, and in my heart I only longed for his death."

His head dropped, and there was a long, terrible silence. His words had fallen like stones deep into the hurtle of the station. Cornelia's silence was like those same stones stoning Hope to death. She was looking at him, a divine comprehension striving through the love and pity of her gaze, but his eyes were holden that he could not see it.

"Dear," she said, "I know that Jacob Yates sent for him; and I have your letter in which you told him he would run a risk if he went."

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"I wrote it," Michael said, "but I wanted him to come. I wanted him to die that you might be free. . . . And afterwards I dare not claim you for my sin."

She could scarcely follow the words that came haltingly across his dry lips.

"And this was why you were silent," she said tenderly. "If I had only known!"

"Wasn't it enough?" he asked. "There was blood on my hands." He held out his hands as if to show her the stain. Cornelia took them in hers, and tried to cover them with her own.

"Dear hands," she said; "so strong and helpful. Hands that build God's house—and my heart's home."

"How shall God accept my work?" he groaned.

"Wait until He rejects it," Cornelia said. "You did right to give Jacob's request. The rest is God's."

"From the bottom of my heart I wished him dead," Michael said sternly. "I will not deceive myself."

"Wasn't it a natural wish? He was spoiling my life. He had taken advantage of my ignorance to marry me. I could have been his housekeeper or his adopted child—but he bound me to him." She stopped abruptly. "He is dead," she added more gently. "We had no need to wish for his life."

Her face was calm. It seemed strange that

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what appeared so simple and natural to her should have crushed him with a weight of horror.

Each felt compassion for the other welling up in the pain and the joy. Each had traveled by a dark road to this hour with the sunshine at its heart. To Michael it seemed that Cornelia's love was large enough to cover his sin—strong enough to lift him again to the feet of God. The knowledge came in a gushing happiness so deep and strong that it swept away the torment of his guilt, washing away the sin with its punishment. Could not love do miracles?

His conscience had been bound in the grave-clothes of dogmatism. Now Love stood by the grave and commanded Life to loose him and let him go.

He took Cornelia's hand, and her fingers closed round his with a reassuring strength. Her face, too, was grave. There was none of the radiance of love about them. It had dawned timidly, and the clouds round the sunrise were gray. Only in the content of their eyes there was the promise of a perfect noon—not the riot of the year at its spring, but the ample blossom of the summer day.

They paced the station, soberly considering their future. Cornelia agreed to his proposal to ask Mrs. Blake's hospitality until they could be married. It would be best for the wedding to take place at Sandy Hurst. Cornelia had been there a week, Arabella Kent having told her that

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Michael was there. It was close to Liverpool and she wanted to see him once more before she left England. After Michael's stay in the town only a short notice to the registrar would be needed, and they could be married that week.

They found Mrs. Blake full of sympathy and help; but the Independent Chapel was not licensed for marriages. They were married at the registrar's office by license, and late on Saturday night they arrived in Great Lowlands.

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CHAPTER XIX

On Sunday morning Michael preached to his people again. His housekeeper had not had time or opportunity to spread the report of his marriage, and Cornelia sat in the chapel, no one suspecting that she was his wife.

Every one noticed the new brightness on the Minister's face. He came down the aisle smiling and shaking hands with them all; his heart expanded at the welcome they gave him. Had he ever thought these kindly hearts vulgar?—ever wanted to minister to a different congregation? It was splendid to be back among them again—splendid to feel that they were his own people to whom he was something more than a popular preacher. He gave a smile here and a glance there, and stopped every minute to kiss the children who clung to his legs and hindered his walk. It was Sunday morning, and he was in the chapel, but his laugh rang out among the "God bless you's" and sighs of content that went with him down the aisle. He lifted Nellie Brunt, and tossed her up among the lamps for sheer happiness, and every face reflected his spirits.

Dear, dear, what a boy the Minister was, and how good it was to see his young face again, God bless him!

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Michael shot a twinkling, amused glance across the pews to where Cornelia stood waiting till he was free of the crowd. She was watching him, proud and radiant at his popularity, and her answering smile crowned the morning for him. Ah, yes! it was true; God had not rejected him.

Outside the porch a group was waiting for the crowd to melt away; then they closed round him, Jacob Yates, and the Bassetts, and the Nettlefolds. Arabella Kent had gone home, making a point of avoiding Michael; but Susan Charm was there; and Phœbe Bassett, clinging to Ruth, clamoured for a kiss from the Minister.

Who could fail to see the eager happiness that flashed about him as he lifted Phœbe? His arms held possibilities.

"You look like a new creature!" Mrs. Bassett exclaimed. "Why, what have you been doing to make you look like that?"

"I have been getting married," he said, reddening like a girl. He turned to Cornelia, who had come into the porch, and took her hand. "My wife is an old friend," he said bashfully.

"Your wife!"

They fell back and left Michael and Cornelia standing alone in the shadow of the porch. Constraint held every face, and icy disapproval.

The husband and wife, surprised and hurt, looked from one to the other, and met no sympathy. Then Ruth came forward. Her eyes

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were glassy, and the smile on her lips was waxen, but she kissed Cornelia, and gave her hand to Michael. "I am sure you will be very happy and useful," she said in her high voice. Her smile challenged the frowning faces. Seeing it, Susan Charm's eyes filled. "Dead people smile like that," Susan said to herself, "and I don't wonder. . . ."

She went up to Michael, her curls bobbing nervously.

"My dear Cornelia. . . . My dear Mr. Ross. . . . You have surprised us so. . . . But I wish you every good gift; I am sure we all do." She waved her hand round the circle.

"Good gift indeed—and the poor old man not cold in his grave," said Mrs. Nettlefold cuttingly. "No, Susan; no, Ruth; I will not be quiet. It's not decent, and I will tell Cornelia so. And as to Mr. Ross, after all that's passed. . . ."

Michael's eyes stopped her. She drew her skirts up and walked away, her heels grinding the gravel.

"It would have been more seemly to have waited for a decent interval," said the Deacon mildly. "For the Church's sake I regret this haste and this secrecy."

He walked slowly after his wife. Jacob Yates shuffled after him, his small mean figure in its loose broadcloth held very stiffly. His lips were stretched over his large teeth. His malignant eyes swept the group in a backward glance.

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"Secrecy!" he muttered, but so that all could hear. "Who is the liar now? It's not a month since he said he'd never marry . . . and interfering with other people's marriages. . . ."

Mrs. Bassett came nearer, her face troubled, a cloud over her good nature. "I wish you happy, Cornelia, and Mr. Ross too. But Jacob is right, and you've not acted above-board with your friends. There was no need to keep so quiet if there was nothing to hide. . . . And after Mr. Ross saying he had no thought of marriage! . . . That's what I don't understand from our Minister. Come, father; come, Phœbe."

She checked Mr. Bassett, who was rubbing his hands and beaming on the two, and pulled Phœbe away to follow the Nettlefolds.

With a sudden fierce protectiveness Michael drew Cornelia's arm through his.

"What have we done?" he said, throwing his head back. "Surely our marriage concerns ourselves alone."

"It is only . . . You spoke so decidedly," Susan faltered. "And it is rather soon. . . ."

"Eternity itself would not have made us more certain of each other's love," said Michael. He gazed at Cornelia, his face gentle.

"There was no need to wait, Susan," Cornelia said. "I had no old life to regret. I have never been happy till now."

She looked at Michael as she spoke, and her face was wonderful in its great simple love.

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"Dear child, I don't blame you," Susan said. But she glanced at Ruth's frozen face, and her eyes were dim.

Her look woke Ruth. "If we had known, we would have welcomed you home properly," she said kindly.

Cornelia turned impulsively to her. "Dear Ruth, I want to tell you all about it. Come in and see me to-morrow."

Ruth shook her head. "To-morrow every one will be calling."

Her voice was a dagger in Cornelia's joy. In the tumult of her sudden happiness she had forgotten Ruth; now she remembered.

As for Ruth, she did not understand her own feelings. She had called Michael weak and a hypocrite; but when she saw him Cornelia's husband she could not think him either weak or a hypocrite. He held his head high and looked them all in the face, a man who had nothing to conceal. It was she who had been weak, she who had been unworthy of love or trust. She might have helped him in a crisis, and she had failed him. She thought she had loved him; but now her heart ached, not because she had lost him, but because her love had been weighed and found wanting.

Cornelia's face, splendid in its happiness, recalled her own words: "Your life would be great if it were only free."

Beside Michael, Cornelia's life would be great.

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There was something heroic already in their love.

"I am glad; I am glad," Ruth said to herself. "She loved him better than I did." But in her gladness was the bitterness of death, and the unutterable bitterness of life.

Ruth had said every one would be calling on Cornelia, but no one came the next day nor the next. Only Dr. Kent met Michael and congratulated him with a fervour that atoned for the coldness of the rest of the congregation. Arabella would have called on Mrs. Ross at once, he said, but she was in a domestic crisis. They were without a housemaid.

On Thursday Cornelia's first visitor arrived.

When Mrs. Pace was announced Cornelia was in the drawing-room alone. She had been putting little feminine touches to the stiff furniture, and singing while she worked; but when she heard the name of the lawyer's wife a kind of angry scorn stunned the song on her lips. She remained standing at the end of the room, and did not go to meet her visitor.

Mrs. Pace was a large, florid woman, who dyed her hair yellow, and powdered; and, as the result, stood in the eyes of Great Lowlands on the edge of the smart and wicked world. She was a person of consequence in the village, and her manner in greeting Cornelia was all condescension and patronage.

"My dear Mrs. Ross," she began, "I've just

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heard of your marriage, and I've come at once to congratulate you. I'm so pleased that you have done so well after all. They tell me that Mr. Ross is quite comfortably off for a dissenting minister, with a private income, and this sweet little cottage. We've taken sittings in the chapel because he's such a good preacher, and I said at once I would call. . . ."

Talking all the way, she advanced, holding out her hand; but Cornelia would not see the hand. She had drawn herself to her full height, and now she waited, her face still, yet alive with indignation. The sense of outrage in her expression was like a blow in the face of her visitor's cordiality.

"Really, Miss Janes—Mrs.—Miss," she stammered, halting in her advance.

She reminded herself that this young woman had once been her governess, but she could only remember the girl she had turned from her doors.

"Perhaps I had better say I am willing to forget and forgive the past," she said with bland impertinence.

Cornelia gazed at her coldly. "I must tell you that I do not intend to forget or forgive the past."

Mrs. Pace jerked up her head and stared at her through her lorgnette.

"Why, what is this?" she cried. "You forget yourself! You forget your position—a hired

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servant. . . . And giving yourself airs—to me?"

Cornelia stood motionless, her chin raised a little, her breath coming slowly, but her eyes like live coals. Their gleam made Mrs. Pace blench again, and fall back speechless. She affected to busy herself with her dress, then shot a furtive glance at Cornelia.

Cornelia answered it, her voice falling like the stroke of a whip.

"I was in your house, a motherless girl, scarcely older than your own daughters. . . . You saw your husband insult me, and you knew the kind of man he was. You drove me out of your house, penniless—as you said, without character. It is not your fault I was not made the thing you said I was. It is women like you who drive women to evil. I refuse to know you. You will be so kind as to leave my house. I think you will not attempt to enter it again."

"Well, indeed!" Mrs. Pace spluttered, purple with rage; but a gesture from Cornelia cowed her.

The girl went to the door, held it open, and waited. Her eyes menaced now like snakes, and drove her visitor before them.

With a futile attempt at dignity Mrs. Pace stumbled past Cornelia and found her way out of the house.

Cornelia stood where she left her, her head up, her face gorgon-like in its anger; but a noble in-

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dignation, a stern womanliness made her goddess as well as fury.

There were steps in the garden, and at the sound she flew to the window. It was Michael, and her passion dropped from her like a mask. There was not a trace of the Medusa left. In a moment she was an eager child, radiant and beautiful.

She danced to the door, and Michael coming in wearily met a smile that sent care flying. He took her face in both his hands and gazed down at her.

"What a young wife I have!—only a week old."

"A week!" she pouted. "Haven't I been your wife ever since I lived at all?"

He smiled gravely; then sighed. "They might have let us be happy a while longer. But life is like the new chapel; it may be beautiful in itself, but the old buildings shoulder it hideously. Somebody's past is always ready to spoil somebody's present."

She put her hands on his shoulders, stood a little way off, and studied his face with eyes suddenly grave.

"What is it? Did you meet Mrs. Pace?"

"Mrs. Pace! No. It is that poor girl Sarah, the Kents' housemaid. She is turned away within a month of her confinement; and only the workhouse before her." He looked wistfully at Cornelia. "The workhouse . . . at such

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a time . . . and she is a mere child—she was such a good little thing too."

"She must come here," said Cornelia.

"I hoped you would say so," Michael answered quickly.

They walked up and down talking.

"But who is the man?" Cornelia asked. "Won't he marry Sarah?"

"Jimmie Yates. He and Sarah were lovers before he married Eliza Clarke. That is why I objected to Jimmie's being forced to marry Eliza. Sarah's ruin lies at Jacob's door; but she will lose her membership, while he remains an officer of the Church."

"How cruel life is!" said Cornelia passionately.

"And Jimmie remains housed while Sarah is turned into the streets!"

"Mrs. Brunt has taken her in, but she can't afford to keep her; and Jacob will do nothing for her. Says he will not encourage vice. . . ."

"Beast!" said Cornelia. "He's not worthy to touch Sarah's feet. In Christ's eyes who is the sinner?"

"You are a good woman, Cornelia!"

She turned quickly and laid her hand on his mouth.

"Don't! I might have been in her place." She was suddenly pale.

Michael caught her to him. "You? Never, never!" he said fiercely.

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Then his face changed too. They looked at each other with startled, conscious eyes. The same thought was in each mind.

"It was you saved me," Cornelia whispered, with a catch in her voice. She clung to his arm.

Michael's eyes looked beyond her. He had caught a glimpse of a man fighting against the strain of the rope which was drawing him through stormy seas to safety. At Sandy Hurst he had felt the bonds of a narrow Puritanism. Now he saw that those very bonds had saved him from wrecking his life and Cornelia's. The chain of roses he had woven there would never have borne the strain of their hopeless passion. Righteousness had saved them; and now righteousness and love and a clean life had been given them. The spirit of Puritanism had been the spirit of liberty.

Michael's thanksgiving was a tide that swept him back to the old limited creed. The banks might be narrow, but between them the stream gathered force and depth, and God moved upon the face of the waters.

The moment was big with the future; and he recognised its greatness while he turned to Cornelia with a commonplace, "Come, we must go to Sarah."

Michael's cottage was gay with flowers. Honeysuckle climbed over the porch; clematis clambered about the door; the windows under the old thatched roof were framed in a wealth

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of white roses. Seeded foxgloves, purple lupins, and flaming hollyhocks stood sentry on either side of the path. There was a smell of lavender and sweetbriar and spicy clove-pinks. The bees boomed among the bells; a butterfly, a little ship of the air, spread blue sails and came down the wind. Cornelia saw it all with great flashing eyes that gloried in the beauty. A shaft of sunlight struck across her mood and changed its aspect. She was radiant again—a woman who had never known life and its agony, love and its despair.

"I am so happy, so happy," she sang. "There was never anything better than life and summertime. How glad I am Sarah's baby will come into a pretty world."

Michael smiled down at her. What a child she was after all!

"I've been thinking, Michael," she rippled on, then flushed and stopped. "I wonder if Sarah would let us adopt the little thing. . . . I love babies so. . . ."

She looked eagerly into his face.

"What am I to say?" Michael hesitated. "Jacob Yates's grandchild! No, no; that would never do! And afterwards perhaps . . ."

She misunderstood his reluctance.

"You won't deny me!" she said impetuously. "Try to understand. I would have borne all the horror of those years gladly, gladly, if only I had had a child. And now, when this little

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homeless thing comes, dear, you won't deny me?"

"I must, my sweetheart."

"My first request?" she coaxed.

"First or last, dear."

Her face fell and she moved away from him. Her lips were trembling. He held the gate open for her to pass out of the garden. She looked up as she passed him, and her expression went to his heart; but he did not withdraw his refusal. Some day Cornelia would see that he had been right.

Cornelia dashed the tears from her eyes, and her smile shone out like a rainbow.

"How is it that even this can't make me unhappy?"

Michael remained grave. His thoughts were not with Cornelia. He was knotting round him the cords he had loosened. With a sense of infinite relief he was clinging again to the rope that had saved him.

"God has not rejected me, He uses me to bring back the lost."

The instant after he turned to Cornelia.

"A minister ought not to be a bachelor. I could not have done this for Sarah if I had not been married."

"I'm so glad you married me!" she laughed.

"I'm glad too," he said gravely.

They had expected to find Sarah alone, but Eliza Yates's ample person filled half the room.

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Her big smile made the place cheery, and reflected a timid hope on Sarah's misery.

"Well, now, here's the Minister and his lady, Sarah," she said. "We needn't make no bones about mentioning your trouble before them. Them that's eaten onions can't complain o' the smell. The blame's mine as well as yourn for what's happened. I hadn't ought to have left Jimmie alone them days I was nursing his father. Jimmie has told me all about it—come bleating to me like a lamb to his mother, poor innocent. . . . I tell Sarah, Mr. Ross, I'm willing to bear Jimmie's blame, and I am. I'll pay Mrs. Brunt for the room, and I'll nurse Sarah through her trouble. I've seen as many into this world as out of it; and I do say as birth and death shows you life more than life itself. We never know life till we've seen death; and when we've seen birth we know what death is. . . ."

She stopped at last, and her smile encircled the three.

Michael grasped her hand with an eager, "God bless you! You are showing a true Christian spirit."

"Oh, Christian is what Christian does," said Eliza. "And duty is a pack for my back as well as for other people. Every snail has to carry its own shell, we know; and responsibility is shaped to fit us all."

"We came to offer Sarah a home with us," said Cornelia.

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Eliza beamed upon her. "Well, ma'am, that's the best sermon Mr. Ross has preached yet; but Jimmie's fault is my fault, and I must see as his child comes into the world comfortable. After that Sarah must shift for herself, and take service again."

"No lady will take you when once it's known you've been in trouble," Sarah said despairingly. "And there'll be the child to keep."

"Leave the child alone," Eliza said sharply. "There'll be a crust for the babe as long as the father is in my bakehouse."

"You've no call to be good to me, Eliza," Sarah sobbed. "I had ought to have left Jimmie alone. But I was that fond of him. . . . And my mother's dead. A girl don't go wrong so easy when she's got a mother. . . ." She turned away crimson.

Cornelia came forward impulsively. "As soon as you are well, Sarah, I will take you as housemaid; and I am sure you will win back your character."

"So there you are, Sarah!" Eliza cried cheerily. "'A happy issue out of all your tribulations,' as the Psalm says. And it ain't every one as makes feather pillows gets rid of the fluff of it so easy."

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CHAPTER XX

SARAH'S baby only opened its eyes to close them again forever; but that tiny flash of being cast a stormy glare over the mother's life. She came back to work penitent; but Great Lowlands branded her; and as soon as it was known that the Minister had taken her into his house the members of the chapel raised an outcry. Mrs. Nettlefold bustled, flushed and indignant, into Susan Charm's shop.

"A pretty thing for Cornelia to do!" she gasped. "It's just an encouragement to women to bear bastards. No, Susan, don't tell me! I am a married woman, and I'm bound to set my face against bad practices. And such an example to the Church people, who are none too strict on such matters! Mrs. Pace is going about saying the motto over the chapel should be, 'Sinning made easy for sinners.' She says she wouldn't go into the chapel if you paid her. And the Miss Madisons won't come again either. They say they can't listen to a man who would give Christian burial to an illegitimate, unbaptised child. I'm sure I don't see the good of opening the new chapel if the best people won't come. The cause is going to rack and ruin, and all because the Minister married Cornelia. Every-

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thing has gone wrong since then. I tell the Deacon there's no comfort in sitting under a minister that could treat a girl as Mr. Ross has treated Ruth—and her the Deacon's daughter. But Jonas has no spirit. He says our Ruth never wanted him, and he had a right to marry where he would. Did you ever hear the like? And him drawing his salary from the chapel, and dependent on the people! I suppose he thinks he can step high because he's got a cottage, and a hundred or two a year of his own. I say it spoils a young man to have money. There's no humility or Christian meekness about a pastor that knows he can resign his charge when it suits him."

She sat down and fanned her face. Susan looked mildly at her over her spectacles and calmly went on knitting.

"What does Ruth say to it all?"

"Ruth? oh, Ruth is just as queer as Cornelia. After the way Cornelia came between her and the Minister you might have thought . . . But there! they are as thick as ever, and Ruth says Cornelia is in the right to give Sarah a home. Pretty morality for the daughter to teach her mother! It's a heavy cross for a Christian woman to carry; but I've always said you can't expect chickens from turkey's eggs, and Ruth is a Nettlefold like her father."

"I agree with Ruth," Susan said; "I admire the way she takes her trouble. But I must say

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the Minister has been a different man since he married; it's good for sore eyes to look on his happy face."

"Oh, I've no patience with his happy face! And as for Ruth's trouble, hasn't she always discouraged him? Don't, I beg you, Susan, insinuate that Mr. Ross gave Ruth the go-by. He was just forced to ask Cornelia. A man that's bent on marrying don't put on spectacles to see what he marries."

"No one wants glasses to see what a spirited creature Cornelia is," said Susan quickly.

"Pretty spirit!" Mrs. Nettlefold exclaimed. "Did you hear how she turned Mrs. Pace out of the house? Mr. Pace paid the pew-rent and gave up the sittings that very day."

"But then, Eliza Yates and Jimmie have come back," said Susan. "And Arabella Kent says it was her doing Cornelia went to Sandy Hurst, and she'll stand by Cornelia, whatever Mrs. Pace says."

"Arabella's too clever," Mrs. Nettlefold sneered. "She'll say next it's she sending Lewis to The Poplars courting."

Susan looked up. "I must say I'll be delighted if that comes to anything. The doctor will make a good husband, whoever gets him."

Mrs. Nettlefold tightened her lips and looked oracular; but nature was too strong for her. A smile forced its way through. She pressed nearer to Susan with a joyful whisper.

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"He's a young man in a thousand, Susan. It's a real treat to hear him talk about millinery. I only wish the Deacon had his taste in bonnets."

"And what does Ruth say to him?"

A sigh shook Mrs. Nettlefold's bosom. "Oh, Ruth is neither to have nor to hold. But I've always said Lewis Kent was her fate."

"Well, fate overtakes us, however fast we run," said Susan. "Here's Tobias with kittens, and so long a bachelor."

"If I could nurse a child of Ruth's, I wouldn't wish for more," said Mrs. Nettlefold plaintively. "But it's disheartening to see Cornelia married twice, and younger than Ruth. In my day we had families before we were twenty."

"A family must be a beautiful thing, Mrs. Nettlefold. Only to see Tobias with the kittens shows me what a single woman misses."

"Ah! indeed Susan, it ain't worth while being a woman and not a mother. You get all the kicks and none of the crusts. Life's hard unless there's a child to make it easy."

"Life's hard, but death's harder on a mother," said Susan. "I'm thinking of Sarah. All that trouble, and her baby dead—and a boy, too."

"I lost my second the same way—and a boy, too." Mrs. Nettlefold's voice changed. "I know what it is."

Susan made no answer. They sat a long time, the click of the knitting-needles the only sound in the little shop.

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Then Mrs. Nettlefold got up slowly. "I doubt I've been hard on Sarah, Susan." She flushed, then added with an effort: "If Mrs. Pace should say anything against the Minister for helping Sarah, you may mention that I quite approve of him doing it after what she's gone through. . . . When I remember my little . . . It was just the same way; and he was a boy, too."

She hurried to the door; then she turned, her handkerchief to her eyes. "Don't mind me, Susan; I often say myself there's nothing so womanish as a woman."

Susan went into her parlour. Tobias was asleep on his cushions. She took him in her arms and remained a long time holding him. Her thoughts made her face wan.

From that day Mrs. Nettlefold was Michael's friend; but the dissatisfaction against him spread, kept alive by private wrongs. The draper's wife looked at the dresses she had meant for Ruth's trousseau, and said it was a scandal for the Minister to be married at the registrar's office. How could he expect the young people to be married in chapel when he set them such an example? The livery-stable keeper, who had provided new cushions in the landau in readiness for the wedding, was sure there was something wrong when the Pastor came slinking home in the dark with his bride, and not so much as a carriage at the station.

The episode of Sarah had justified Michael's

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opposition to Jimmie Yates's marriage, and Jacob could not forgive him for being in the right.

Arabella Kent used the incident as a stalking-horse behind which to shoot the shafts that disappointment had feathered. She had been obliged to cover her defeat by a warm patronage of Michael's wife; but when Cornelia employed the girl she had dismissed she had a valid excuse for stirring up a hornet's nest in the chapel.

Michael knew nothing of all this. He and Cornelia, happy in each other, were as unconscious of the members' dissatisfaction as of Arabella's dislike.

Arabella's plans had gone a-glee. She had lost Michael, and it seemed as if she would lose her brother. Lewis had taken her advice to heart, and was often at The Poplars. As the summer waned and the autumn came on he continued his visits, encouraged by Mrs. Nettlefold, and not discouraged by Ruth.

She received him always with a look that made him uncertain if she knew he was there. After one of his vague interviews with her he would shrug his shoulders and tell himself he was only chasing a shadow. But the shadow was the most alluring thing in his life, and he chased it still.

Autumn flamed and faded. The fields were reaped; the new chapel, white and shining, stood ready to be opened at the "Harvest Home"; and still the shadow lured him on.

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"I wonder if you are a woman or a spirit," he said to Ruth one dull October day.

"I am not a woman, I think. I don't feel as other women do. I don't want the same things."

"What do you want, Ruth?" His voice was light as usual, but his eyes fixed on her were wistful.

"To be able to feel," she said, in a dreamy voice.

He studied her curiously. She leaned back in her chair, her hands idle in her lap, her face dim against the yellow cushions, a brooding twilight in her eyes. They were in her own sanctum, and the room was full of colour—reds and golds and browns made by the great boughs of painted autumn leaves, and bracken, and fern.

The leafy pageantry held a memory of an enchanted field, of waving grasses and sunburnt faces, of singing children. It was Fra Angelico's *Paradiso* again. Lewis felt once more that he stood outside the *Paradiso*, and that a movement of those idle hands might open the gate to him.

He pushed his chair nearer to hers.

"When did you feel last? Do you remember?"

She looked at him as if she did not see him.

"Remember? Oh yes, I remember. The day I leaped the Devil's Dyke it was."

"The shock of your escape stunned you?" he suggested.

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"Yes, it was the shock of my escape."

In his eyes, which he had never taken from her, there leaped a sudden daring.

"Ruth, you never loved that man."

"I know," she answered. She waited a moment, then turned away quietly.

He felt impatience at her calm—a desire to crash through the filmy dream that enmeshed her; to beat against her heart with a clamouring passion until the woman in her woke and came and opened to him. He felt all this, but he only gave her a cheerful, kindly look.

"The man loves the woman," he said reflectively, "but the woman only loves her idea of him."

Ruth turned her vague eyes towards him.

"I didn't realise that a man could fail and yet be great."

"Oh yes; some of our greatest men are great failures."

"I would place him amongst the greatest."

"Come, come," he laughed, "he doesn't deserve that, you know. You are idealising. He is like the rest of us—built of human clay."

"I was unjust to him," she went on dreamily. "I made myself better than a good man. You remember the Sunday I came out of chapel? I meant it for a public reproof. . . . And I called him a hypocrite." She smiled forlornly, then went on in the same colourless voice: "And now I know I was wrong to doubt him. I wish

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I could see other people wronging him, that I might take his part before the world."

"What is the use of that?" he said prosaically. "It's enough that you've justified him to yourself. He's a lucky beggar. He's married the woman he wanted. He has built his chapel, and he has three people to believe in him. Most of us have only ourselves to believe in ourselves."

"Who is the third?" she asked.

"I am." He shrugged his shoulders with a rueful look. "There's a deal of claptrap about his preaching—at least, there used to be; it's improved lately: but the man is true—honest to the backbone. He has a heart, and doesn't deny it; and he doesn't know what fear is."

"He is timid morally," said Ruth; "that's where he fails."

Lewis leaned back and laughed.

"I share the weakness. You might spare some of your admiration for me, Ruth. I am really a person of some pretensions to timidity, though I fought your battles when we were children. I would do it better now if you would let me." She did not seem to hear him, and he went on, his voice grown rough. "I've always loved you, but—you see, Arabella. . . . Then I thought you cared for the Minister, and I said nothing. . . . But now it is different."

"No," she said, "it is just the same. I am so sorry, Lewis."

"Never mind," he said, swallowing the lump

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in his throat. "Sorry I bothered you. Try and forget it, will you?"

She laid her hand on his. "No, I won't forget it; I shall like to think I have one friend."

"You'll always have me," he said.

He kept his eyes on her hand a moment, then drew his own from beneath it.

"Those fingers of yours are too white, Ruth—not enough red corpuscles in them. I'll send you some iron. You'll take it, eh?"

While he spoke he was looking about for his hat.

"Yes," she answered. "And Lewis, it isn't that I don't think you a better man than—than—Cornelia's husband. I do. You are finer, I think. You don't make people think of being good so much as of goodness itself." She pressed her hands to her forehead in a bewildered manner. "I can't explain, but I know it is finer. Just as white is more perfect than any colour because it contains all the colours."

"That's beyond me," he said, twirling his hat round, and not looking at her. "But it doesn't matter much what I am so long as I am the man you can't love."

"I shall never love any one," she said calmly. "Once I thought I did, with all my heart and soul, and it was not love at all."

"You women think too much about such abstractions as heart and soul," he said. "The thing that matters is to be able to trust the man you marry."

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"Don't you believe in love, Lewis?"

"I do, if you mean the adaptation of two natures to each other. What girls call love is a mere emotional crisis. If there isn't a man about, the church or the chapel, books, or another woman, will do just as well to bring it on. Marriage is another story."

"There is no happiness in marriage without love."

"Oh, yes there is, in the real marriage. A woman will leap from a hopeless love into a loveless marriage, and years after she will find that the man she loved could never have made her so happy as the man she married. . . . Goodbye, and remember those red corpuscles."

He stopped on the landing a minute, and reflected on the interview. It was already intangible, faint in memory. Had he only dreamt it?

"'Pon my word, I feel as if I had been asking a ghost to marry me," he said to himself, smiling.

Mrs. Nettlefold, coming up-stairs, caught the words, and broke into smiles.

"So you have been asking Ruth, Lewis? And your face tells me that it is as it should be. And to think I've been fidgeting and worriting down-stairs, and everything settled up-stairs! Dear, dear, I'm just delighted, and so will the Deacon be. I've said time and again if I could choose my son-in-law it should be young Dr. Kent. And now Ruth will be a married woman, and hold

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her head higher than Cornelia, who was only a widow."

She took his hand and wrung it. Lewis drew it away.

"My dear Mrs. Nettlefold, there's nothing I should like better than to be your son-in-law," he said, his mouth twisting comically. "But you have only one daughter, and she won't marry me."

"Refused you! You mean to say Ruth has refused you?"

"So it seems," he smiled. "Good-bye!" he called, as he ran lightly down the stairs.

Mrs. Nettlefold caught at the banisters, and all the triumph faded out of her face, which grew pinched and old.

"She's refused him—refused him," she said dully. Then she dragged her heavy feet up and went into Ruth's room.

She was still where Lewis had left her, leaning back with folded hands and expressionless face that did not change when she saw her mother. But something in Mrs. Nettlefold's quiet roused her.

"Mother, aren't you well?"

"Yes, Ruth," she said in a dead voice. "As well as a woman can be who has nothing left to hope for. Is it true the doctor asked you to marry him, and you refused?"

Ruth pressed her hand over her eyes.

"I suppose that was what he meant."

"Ah, well!"

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Mrs. Nettlefold was silent a while, her face working. Then she put her hand softly on Ruth's head.

"My dear, will you come with me a minute?"

Vaguely troubled, Ruth followed her into her own room. Mrs. Nettlefold chose a key from her bunch and opened a drawer. She stood hanging over it before she spoke.

"Look there, Ruth," she said, with lips trembling.

There was something in her face that made Ruth move as in the presence of a sacred grief. She looked into the drawer, then at her mother, her eyebrows raised.

In the drawer was a dainty medley of ribbons and laces and feathers that slowly took shape in tiny caps and bonnets.

"I made 'em for your first baby, Ruth," her mother whispered. "I made sure you'd be married and have a family long before this. I haven't had any happier times than sitting sewing them, and thinking of you nursing your baby, and me looking on, the proudest, gladdest. . . ." Her voice broke. She stooped over the drawer, and lifted a little bonnet tenderly. "From the day you were born I began to think of you married, and me with my grandchildren. . . . It's been my dream. . . . Ah, well, we have to wake from dreaming. . . ."

As she listened a strange trouble grew at Ruth's heart.

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"My poor, poor child! I doubt while you're dreaming of love you'll let love go by you, Ruth." Her voice choked. "Ruth, a woman don't know what love is till she feels her baby at her breast."

"Give them to Cornelia," Ruth said in a strangled voice. "She is going to have a little child. Oh, mother! mother! Cornelia is going to have her own little child! And she has his love—and I nothing! nothing!"

"Yes, my dear, yes; you have your mother; you have your old mother. Cornelia never knew what that was."

"Her own little child! Her own little child!" Ruth repeated. She moved away from her mother, her face hard, and careless of Mrs. Nettlefold's trouble, of her appeal. No touch of nature had made her kin.

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CHAPTER XXI

It was dusk, and the chapel was full of shadows, but Michael and Cornelia still lingered. The sun slanted through the west window, and showed the new chapel adorned for the Harvest Festival, which would be also the Dedication Service.

Every pillar was garlanded with ripe corn, the shaft rising from yellow sheaves. The carved woodwork of the galleries and pews was outlined with ears of barley fringed with oats. The windows were piled with purple and red and yellow fruit. Texts traced in scarlet berries were on the walls—Arabella's work—"Whatsoever a man soweth that also he shall reap," had been given the place of honour over the pulpit.

Earlier in the afternoon the chapel had been full of workers, but now they had gone, leaving the Minister and his wife to put the last touches.

Michael's face was shining. In his heart was deep peace and quiet, the joy of the year at its full, and thankfulness. He had completed his work, the chapel was without flaw, perfect as hands could make it. The walls of pure white stone rose high above the oaken galleries to the oaken ceiling, and every stone and plank had been examined by him before it had been set in

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place. His hand had been on every part. It was his church.

He went down the aisle to the font, where Cornelia had twined the text, "Suffer little children to come unto Me."

She looked up at him with a pretty deprecation on her face.

"It is not quite a harvest text, I know. But don't you think the little children are God's harvest?"

He smiled down at her. "I know what you are thinking of."

A tender, wonderful look grew in her eyes. She clasped her hands over his arm.

"You have your heart's desire. Are you happy, Michael?"

"Perfectly happy, dear."

"And I too," she said, looking at the garland round the font. "Michael, your work is perfect."

"It is God's work," he said gravely.

She pressed closer to him, understanding his mood.

In her short and thwarted life, in his longer, less thwarted, but lonely one there had been little that was perfect, little that was joyful. Now he saw his dream fulfilled; and Cornelia saw before her the realisation of a still more wonderful dream.

Then Michael stepped aside, and Cornelia waited for him. Her eyes filled with tears as

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she saw him kneel before the communion rails, his head bowed, the ray from the window slanted across it. He was so good, all her heart went out to him.

Michael knelt where he had wrestled in the darkness of defeat, without hope, and without love. Now love was beside him, his highest hope was realised. But the bar of sunset lay like the rod of God on his bare head.

He rose from his knees, his eyes solemn and glad. They fell on the letters of a marble tablet: "To the glory of God, and the memory of the Reverend Robert Dawson." The memorial of death struck a grim note among the garlands; and the joy faded from Michael's face. Jacob Yates had suggested that the memorial tablet should be placed in the new chapel, as the congregation was leaving the old one, and Michael had not opposed it. It was meet that his sin should be chronicled with the story of his success, he thought humbly. He had sinned, but God had forgiven his transgression, and had accepted the house built in His name. To-morrow it would be dedicated to His service.

He looked at the tablet with a chastened pain. He had overcome his morbid self-reproach. He no longer felt that Mr. Dawson had met his death at his hands; and yet, in the background of his conscience, there was a door that he dare not unlock. He could not be quite at peace till the chapel was open. That meant to him God's forgiveness.

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"Yes, Thou forgivest, but with all forgiving
Canst not restore my innocence again,"

he said to himself; and the shadow did not lift from his face. But Cornelia was there. In her presence no shadow could remain long. She was his sun and his morning, his light and his defense against the black memory.

They left the chapel together. Outside, Michael dropped back and stood looking up at the beautiful white walls, shining out of the dusk. They were all the more beautiful in contrast with the shabby block of buildings beside them. Seeing them, he sighed. The flaw in the loom was here too.

"I wish people wouldn't burn feathers," said Cornelia, lifting her nose daintily. "The whole street is full of the smell of them."

The detail did not interest Michael.

"You are so grave, dear, you ought to be glad," she said, taking his arm. "What troubles you?"

"The terror of the law," he said. "That 'Whatsoever a man soweth' is so relentless. It is stern and terrible, spoiling the joy of harvest."

The same thought was in Ruth's mind at that moment. She was sitting over the fire in the drawing-room, tired from the long day at the chapel. She wished Arabella had not chosen that text. It seemed to hold a threat more than a promise.

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"The harvest of sin is so much more certain than the harvest of good," she said to herself.

Her thoughts wandered on to Lewis Kent. All his life he had been sowing love, giving care and thought and unselfishness, and what had he reaped? A loveless life, hard work, a cold home, even ingratitude. Michael had won more love during his five years in Great Lowlands than Lewis in all his life. Yet if the law held for one, why not for another?

"Fire! fire!"

She had heard nothing of the distant cries, but now a voice shouting in the garden made her spring to her feet, and stand trembling.

"The new chapel is a-fire! Oh, my God! the new chapel!"

Ruth rushed to the door. She overtook her father at the gate, and they ran together to the High Street. A rain of smuts was falling. The smoke swept upward in a motionless sky. Its darkness added to the dark of the evening, and shadowed the faces of people running along the cobbles.

"The new chapel! Oh, my God! the new chapel!" the Deacon groaned as they ran. "It will break my heart!"

"Poor Mr. Ross! Oh, poor Mr. Ross!" Ruth wailed.

"Ay—and the best building my hands ever put together!"

Instinctively both stopped at Michael's cottage.

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Gate and door stood wide open; no one answered the Deacon's shouts. They ran on. At the bend of the road Ruth stopped.

"It's not the chapel! It's Brown's buildings. Look, father!" she called.

The Deacon took off his hat. "Now praise the Lord for His great mercy!"

The buildings were before them, every raft and beam outlined in fire. It made a jeweled palace of the old block, from which the flames darted up like the flashing of gems. A thatched house bridged the space between the buildings and the gleaming walls of the chapel.

"The house will go next—it's plaster and rubbish. The chapel's doomed!" the Deacon groaned. His head dropped to his breast. He turned away from seeing the destruction of his work.

Ruth's eyes were blinded by the glare. Even where they stood the heat was scorching. Every moment the crowd pressed further back along the street. The old wood burnt like tinder. Firemen poured a ceaseless stream on the flames that only hissed more fiercely as they licked up the water. The residents were all safe;—it was hopeless to try to save the buildings.

"If only the fire could be cut off from that thatched house!" the people said to each other.

The firemen exchanged glances. "The wind's rising. It's blowing that way."

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Michael was among them, standing in his shirt-sleeves, a strained and terrible look on his face. He had been working, with the strength of ten, now his hands dropped to his side. He lifted his white face to the sky. Above the flame and smoke a star had come out. It hung pale on the edge of the night, but he saw only the menace of the flames wavering in the wind. He gazed round him, desperate; then seized a hose and ran with it towards the chapel, the firemen straightening it out behind him. They did not know what he was going to do, but they recognised their leader. He dragged it into the chapel, up the gallery steps to the window that faced the buildings. The roof of the house was immediately under the window.

Suddenly the crowd below swayed forward. There was a cry, and a hush of terror. They saw him creeping along the thatch hose in hand. He lifted himself up and stood, his face and figure lit up by the glare.

"It's the Minister! the Minister!" ran along the crowd.

"He's mad! It's throwing life away!" a man growled angrily. It was Jacob Yates.

Michael had lifted the hose and was pouring the stream onto the flames nearest the thatch. The water directed from the roof made better play than from below, but the heat made his position impossible.

Then they saw that he was protected by an-

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other hose playing upon him, and the protest of the crowd sank into breathless suspense.

Ruth pushed her way to the fire engines. Cornelia stood among the men. It was she holding the hose that covered Michael.

Ruth sprang to her side. "Let me, Cornelia. You should not! You!"

"No," said Cornelia quietly. "It is my work. The only way to save. . . ."

"I know! I know! Oh, Cornelia!" she cried, "why did you let him?"

"The chapel! Don't you see? the wind. . . ."

"His life is more!" Ruth wailed.

The water hissed in a ceaseless stream, and still the flames darted up unchecked. The throb of the engine was like the beat of a muffled drum in a funeral march. Ruth's heart kept time to its slow doom, while her eyes clung to the roof where Michael fought his fight with fire. Against the white walls he stood out transfigured, and the lighted spray made a jeweled halo for his head. Once he pushed the hair back from his forehead, and the familiar gesture gave Ruth a sick feeling that the roof was his pulpit, and he was preaching his last sermon to them.

"It's sheer madness!" a voice shouted; "and you fools doing nothing to stop it! Why don't you call him down? Where's the escape?"

"Can't make him hear, Doctor; and the fire escape's in Framley."

"Then fetch him down—anyhow." Lewis

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turned furiously to the firemen, but they hung back.

Kent swung round, and the sight of his face made Ruth cold.

"Oh, Lewis! what are you going to do?"

"Do? If it's not too late. . . ."

She clutched his sleeve. "Oh, Lewis! not you! not you!"

He pulled himself roughly from her, and pushed through the crowd to the chapel. The door stood open, and as he flew up the steps to the gallery he saw a wreath of flame twining round a pillar. A spark had come through the open window and fired one of the garlands of corn. Lewis set his mouth hard, and ran on. As he gained the window a cry of horror broke from the people watching.

The flames had leaped up on the roof where Michael stood and closed round him in a ring of fire. The hose fell from his hand and clattered hissing into the flames. They saw him throw up his hands in despair, then crouch and creep along the thatch. He crept slowly and stealthily, and the fire crept with him. The whole house was burning; flames darted out from the windows, climbed the walls, and ran along the roof. It was a race for life. Would he reach the chapel before the roof fell in?

A horrified hush settled on the white, upturned faces watching him. Cornelia's face was blanched, but her hands were steady, and she covered him

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with the water which the flames licked up behind him.

Then her figure grew rigid—a point of silence in the muffled groan that went up as Michael stumbled and fell forward on the sloping roof.

Cornelia's limbs were leaden; she tried to move, and remained frozen. Instinctively she kept the hose playing round him.

Ruth threw up her hands. "It's the Minister!" she screamed. "Save him! Save him!"

No one moved. A sullen terror held every face. She wrung her hands frantically. Was there no one?—no one? Where was Lewis? Oh, not Lewis! not Lewis! . . .

She dashed forward, then stopped, and fell on her knees, and covered her face. Lewis was creeping along the burning thatch to Michael. . . .

He lifted him, and the stillness of death knit the crowd into the heart of one. . . . Another moment, horror shook it into a hundred frantic voices. A screen of fire reared itself between the two men and the white walls of the chapel!

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CHAPTER XXII

MICHAEL stood amongst the ruins of the chapel gazing at the blackened walls. His face, scarred and worn, bore the marks of that fight with fire in which he had been worsted. He had failed to save the chapel.

The walls stood uninjured under the smoke, but the fire had consumed all the woodwork. The harvest garlands had led the flames from pillar to roof. Nothing remained of the galleries of oak, the carvings, and faultless beams but a heap of ashes.

Lewis Kent had succeeded in getting through the window with Michael still unconscious; but he had struck his head and fallen, stunned, on the gallery floor. It was Ruth who had saved them.

Frantic with terror when the flames leaped up on the roof, she had rushed through the smoke in the chapel and up to the window, where she had found them. She had brought help; and was herself one of those who had carried them through the burning chapel to safety.

Michael had escaped with life and limb, but now as he gazed on the chapel his eyes were the eyes of a man who has seen his desire fail. "Rejected of God," was branded on his heart.

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"Was he not rejected of God?" he asked himself sternly. His work had been destroyed on the very eve of dedication. Was it not God's judgment on his sin?

"Lord, who shall abide in Thy tabernacle? Who shall dwell in Thy holy hill? He that hath clean hands and a pure heart. . . ."

He had purged his heart for the service of God. He had cleansed his hand to minister before Him. He had straightened out the tangles in his web of life, and lo! the flaw in the beginning reappeared in the fabric.

Was it to be so always? Would his sin also blacken that fair house of life he had thought to build to the glory of God and the service of man?

"Whatsoever a man soweth. . . ." "Visiting the sins of the fathers upon the children. . . ." The texts of doom arrayed themselves before him. He remembered the child that was to be born to him, and his heart died. He remembered the love that he had claimed in the face of God's denial. . . .

He lifted his stricken eyes. The fingers of fire had written his doom on the walls he had reared: "Thou art weighed in the balances and art found wanting." The bitterness of life took hold upon him—the hard misery of sin; the anguish of the soul from whom God hides Himself. . . .

"To the glory of God, and in memory of the

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Rev. Robert Dawson;" the words said themselves in his mind, stirring it to a strange childish curiosity. He stumbled to the place where the tablet had been. The wall was blank. The marble had fallen and lay shattered at his feet.

He lifted a piece of the stone and stood gazing vaguely at the words on it, "The glory of God." As he looked a slow light dawned on his face, and grew and flashed about him. "The glory of God"—this was all that was left of the record of his sin.

A sudden flood of hope swept away the horror that had overwhelmed him. It was a sign from God. He would take it as a sign.

With a fierce, unreasoning joy he gave himself up to the reaction from despair. Those fiery fingers had been sent not in judgment, but in mercy to remove the record of his sin from the place where he should minister before the Lord. The chapel had been burned to save him from the harsh memory.

His heart bounded in him; his eyes shone again. The hand of the Lord was upon him for good and not for evil.

He left the chapel with the old spring in his tread. For the first time since the fire his head was lifted with the old boyish assurance. His eyes danced to the flicker of the sunlight through the leafless trees. He would rebuild the chapel in humility and thanksgiving "To the glory of

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God;" and God would accept the house that had been purged by fire.

But when he laid his scheme before the members they opposed it. No one had any more money to spend on the chapel. They must be content with the old one. Jacob Yates covered his mouth with his hand, and hinted that the Minister was not so popular as he had been, and the old chapel was big enough for what congregation he could draw.

Michael realised with a shock that it was true; he had lost his power over the people. Two years ago he could have persuaded them against their will. He had piped and they had danced; he had laughed, and they had laughed with him. To-day he called, and they would not answer; he entreated, and they were deaf.

Had he changed? It seemed to him that he was more their friend and minister than before. If his sermons were less popular, they were more helpful. Certainly the congregations were not so large since the attendance from other churches had fallen off, but no doubt they would increase again.

He did not know that Mrs. Pace went about with a hint here and a shrug there, until a rumour spread that there was something wrong about the woman he had married, and, in consequence, about the man who had married her.

The coldness of his people distressed him, but it clinched his decision. He would restore the

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ruined chapel, and regain the power he had lost. He silenced objections by announcing that he would bear the cost of restoration himself, and present the new chapel to his people.

The announcement only increased the feeling against him. Jacob Yates went about regretting that they should have a minister who was independent of his people. The members had no hold over him; they must take what he chose to give, whether they liked it or no. The old chapel had been good enough for better ministers than this headstrong young man who refused to be guided by his deacons. In a Church the minister should keep his place. He was the servant not the master of the congregation.

The mass of the members agreed with Jacob; and wherever Michael went he met cold looks. He was tolerated where before he had been honoured and welcomed.

After all, what did their coldness matter? What did anything matter when he could lift up his head again, and look the world in the face? He was a young man, and he had a right to a better church than the dingy old building that had contented generations of pastors. He did not confess, even to himself, how he longed to get away from the church that reminded him of the past.

Meanwhile the old alert look was on his face; he swung along the streets energetic and smiling. "Barriers were for those that

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could not fly." There were no gates and bars for him.

It was touching to see how this triumph changed into a tender humility the moment he crossed his threshold and met Cornelia's eyes, shining with a joy so deep it was nearer to tears than laughter.

Happiness was in his home, and Cornelia was in the heart of it; and in its presence Michael was a coward. The hour that she longed for was full of dread for him.

One Sunday morning at the end of May he went into her room before starting for chapel. Ruth was there with her, and the subdued voices of Mrs. Nettlefold and Eliza Yates charged the air with importance.

Cornelia came to meet him.

"Must you go, dear? Must you?—when I want you so?"

Though she smiled, her face was livid; her eyes looked out of dark caverns of pain. Pain was on his face too, but he could not smile.

"I must, Cornelia." He spoke with difficulty.

"Oh, Mr. Ross, I am sure you oughtn't to leave the house," said Mrs. Nettlefold. "No one will expect you under the circumstances. The Deacon can read a chapter, and give a word of exhortation. Anything might happen, you know, with a first baby."

"Why, what should happen but what will happen?" said Eliza Yates briskly. "Life given,

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or life taken, whatever comes, comes; and there's an end of it."

His eyes fluttered about the room and found no resting-place; then he turned again to Cornelia.

"I must go, dear love. It is not right to leave them without a minister."

"I know," she sighed; "but come back soon, I want you so. . . . I am so happy," she added, seeing his haggard face, "I shan't miss you for happiness."

He went out without a word. He could not even touch her for the dread lest it might be the last time. . . . "Anything might happen," and he must stand in the pulpit speaking platitudes while Life and Death fought on his threshold.

Would it be a life given, or a life taken?

His knees shook under him as he went into the pulpit. . . . But at least he could pray. He could take the hearts of the congregation with him while he pleaded for Cornelia's life.

"The prayers of the congregation are requested for one in peril of life."

His mind formed the words, but they were scorched on his lips by the fiery memory of another prayer that he had prayed in that same pulpit. He had stood before God with a lie on his lips. Would God refuse to hear him now when his whole heart cried out to Him? What if Cornelia's life was the forfeit of his transgression? . . .

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Darkness fell upon him. . . . He raised his hands in an agony of supplication. But the wondering congregation waited in vain for the words of the prayer.

At home Cornelia's gladness made her dull to pain. Everything that brought the joy nearer was welcome. Ruth shared her hope, but to Mrs. Nettlefold and Eliza Yates there was something indecent in her rapture. They looked at each other and shook their heads.

"I never like to see a woman take it too light," Eliza said. "I've seen a-many end badly that begins gladly."

"I'm not afraid," Cornelia said triumphantly.

"Afraid is neither here nor there," said Eliza. "Man is born to trouble as the sparks fly upward. The child cries to come into the world, and the man cries to go out of it. Happy are they that die innocents and know nought of this life's troubles."

"How can you bear to listen?" Ruth said passionately.

Cornelia smiled her calm smile. "They may carve their skulls and cross-bones on the gate, but for all that it is the gate of life."

She gave Ruth a long, wistful look, moved to her, and spoke in a low voice. "There is one thing, Ruth. . . . It may be true, what they are saying. . . . If it should be . . . if Michael is left . . . I should be glad to know that he wouldn't be lonely . . . with you."

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Ruth waited a moment before she spoke. Then she shook her head.

"Not even for you, Cornelia," she said slowly. "I could never be his wife."

"Ay," Eliza was saying to Mrs. Nettlefold; "it's astonishing how long we have to wait sometimes for what will happen. It's a good thing Dr. Kent haven't wasted his morning over this case."

"It's a little minister, Mr. Ross," said Mrs. Nettlefold bustling into the hall to meet Michael; "a little beauty if ever there was one, and preaching already at the top of his voice. I must give you a kiss, I'm so happy. And Cornelia looks as if she was in heaven, bless her! And oh dear! to think she might have had six by this, if she hadn't put off the time with that old husband."

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CHAPTER XXIII

"I HAVE studied the management of children since I was a child myself," Arabella continued. "I saw my responsibilities, and my future, and I reduced motherhood to a science. You would be wiser, Mrs. Ross, if you had taken my advice about your baby."

Cornelia spared a glance from the baby on her knee to give an amused smile. Arabella was sitting very straight, grimmer and sourer than in the days when she had planned to marry Michael. She was a perfect foil for Cornelia, who was all softness, and who, cooing and gurgling over the fat baby, made the prettiest picture imaginable. Motherhood had crowned her beauty. Her eyes were like stars; her lips were haunted by smiles. The baby made every moment a festival for laughter. When she was not laughing, she was singing. Michael, whom the months had sobered, did not recognise in this summer mood the tragic face of the woman he had first loved. But she was all that he had ever hoped for in his wife. His ideal church had been destroyed; but he had in his home the realisation of an ideal love. If he was graver than before, it was only with the gravity of deep happiness.

Arabella tightened her lips and looked disapproval at Cornelia's smile.

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"You haven't reduced motherhood to a science in practice," said Mrs. Ross wickedly.

"If I haven't, it's because I chose not to," Arabella snapped. "A woman can be more useful in directing other women's families than in bringing up her own. Of course it's been hard for me to deny those that have asked me to marry. It's not pleasant to have caused so much pain."

Cornelia brushed back the curls from her forehead, and lifted her eyes rippling with laughter. The idea of the procession of Arabella's lovers passing dejected from her denial, struck her sense of humour, and she burst into a ringing laugh.

"I see nothing to laugh at," said Arabella; "and I shall be glad if you don't have trouble with that child. He is too fat to be healthy. He ought to be creeping at eight months, and he can't even sit up. That comes of not bandaging him at the first. I told you it was tempting Providence to do as you did."

Cornelia's arms tightened round the boy, but her eyes still danced.

"I don't think Providence will be tempted to harm him because he can move about as he likes," she said gaily. "If bandages had been necessary, we should all have been born in whalebone. Dr. Kent says my Sonnie is a splendid boy for eight months. . . ."

"Pooh! what does Lewis know about babies? That child's colour isn't healthy; and dear me,

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hasn't he a squint? I'm sure I saw him squint." She stooped and peered into the child's eyes. "And one eye is smaller and greener than the other. . . . Oh! the little!——"

She broke off with a scream. The baby had put up his fat little hand and pulled off her fringe of false hair.

Arabella snatched it from him, and readjusted it. "That comes of no training at all. If he were my child he should be well spanked for that," she said.

"He is used to pulling my hair; he didn't expect it to come off," said Cornelia innocently. "You see how frightened he is at what he has done! Oh, naughty Sonnie! to pull the booful lady's hair."

"It's quite time he was weaned—a strong child like that," said Arabella tartly. "I suppose you are still nursing him yourself? I could give you some practical help there."

"Oh, please don't!" Cornelia interrupted. "We are quite satisfied with each other, my Sonnie and I."

She looked at Arabella's flat bosom in its casing of alpaca, and against her will she broke again into a merry laugh.

"You seem to be very flighty to-day," said Arabella reddening. "I doubt your fitness to be a mother; and Sarah is not to be trusted either. She was out with him in all that rain yesterday, and if I had not insisted on her going into Jacob

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Yates's cottage, the child would have been soaked."

Cornelia's face suddenly became grave.

"Sarah was quite right not to wish to go there, for her own sake; and baby would not have got wet. Besides, Nellie Brunt and some other children were there, and I don't like my Sonnie to be where there are children, now that there is so much sickness about. I think it was a pity you insisted on Sarah's going in. Jacob spoke harshly to her. She came home broken-hearted; she is so gentle and sensitive."

"Rubbish! It's late in the day for her to be sensitive. And I still say it's a great mistake for you to employ a fallen woman as nurse to your child."

"I don't think so. She lost her baby, poor soul, and it's a comfort to her to be with my Sonnie."

"What right has the woman to expect comfort? And as a minister's wife you ought at least to safeguard your child's morals."

"He hasn't any!" Cornelia laughed, pressing her face against the baby's. "My Sonnie is too innocent to have morals, bless him! That's why he is such a very nice person."

"I don't wonder that people are saying queer things about you," said Arabella, getting up to go. "Morals may be nothing to you; but some day you may find out that they are pew and pulpit and bread and cheese to your husband."

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"Morals, indeed!" Cornelia complained to her son when Arabella had gone. "Did they insult him with morals, as if he was a bad, big man, who is moral only because he can be immoral?"

She hushed him to sleep, smiling over the interview. . . .

"Don't move, Cornelia, I beg. You make a beautiful picture, you and your sweet Sonnie. Indeed, if I didn't dislike everything Popish, I would liken you to the painting of the Madonna and Child which Mr. Ruskin speaks of; though I believe he is quite orthodox. . . ."

It was Susan Charm, daintily tiptoeing up the room.

"Oh, Susan, how glad I am to see you," said Cornelia, holding up her face to be kissed. "No, I won't move; my Sonnie is just getting drowsy. Come and take away the taste of Arabella. She says that my Sonnie squints, and that I have no morals."

"Arabella judges every one by herself," said Susan mildly. She set her spectacles straight and beamed on the two. "No, Cornelia, I can see no squint; and as to your morals, I don't see any either."

She twinkled at Cornelia, enjoying the little joke.

"I don't believe I have any," Cornelia cried gaily. "Since my Sonnie came, the world seems to need nothing but love to make it heaven. I hate parsons and sermons. Their doctrines are

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all dry old mummies. The only part of the Bible I would keep is part of the Gospels: the story of Christ blessing the children. And Mary —I would keep that about Mary, because she is so human, singing the Magnificat, and thinking divine thoughts about her Boy. . . . And the Cross," she sunk her voice, "and the tomb in the garden—yes, I would keep that. The stories of Christ's love, life, and death, are all we need to make us good. Let the old doctrines go! Michael says I'm a heretic; and really, Susan, I'm too happy to be a minister's wife. How can I look sedate and solemn, when I have such a dear little Sonnie? Just look at his toes, little rosy rosebuds, all in a row."

"Cornelia, my dear, you remind me of Tobias when he, or I should say she, had the three kittens. My dear, if you happened to have a tail, I'm sure you would run after it."

"Oh, Susan!" Cornelia pouted, "if you had my Sonnie you would understand. Besides, I am very grave. Only to-day I told Michael his Sonnie is

> "The Cup that clears
> The Past's Regrets, the Future's Doubts and Fears."

"You are a happy creature!" Susan sighed. "When I think that most of my pleasure comes from the colours of my wools and the companionship of Tobias, I am tempted to envy you, my dear."

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"You poor soul!" Cornelia exclaimed. She laid the baby on Susan's knee. "You may hold him a minute, Susan dear; but sit very still so as not to rouse him."

"Thank you, my dear."

The old maid's hands moved gently up and down the baby's pinafore; then she looked at Cornelia with troubled eyes. "He is a sweet child, Cornelia, but there seems to be something wanting in him."

"Wanting? There is nothing, absolutely nothing, wanting in him, Susan."

"I seem to miss a purr, my dear," said Susan mildly. "When I stroke Tobias he purrs."

Cornelia caught up the baby. "Give me my sweetheart!" she laughed. "Go back to your cats and your kittens. A baby is wasted on you."

"I wouldn't say that, Cornelia," said Susan earnestly. "For seeing you with your Sonnie, makes me understand Tobias's feelings better. I can never be too grateful to your dear husband for staying my hand when I would have got rid of the kittens. Now you will always have the benefit of his advice about your baby. It's a great deal to have married a tender-hearted man."

"Michael is so human," Cornelia said thoughtfully. "He is too much of a man to be a minister. Humanity and Divinity don't go together, when the one is a profession and the other a

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practice. The congregation only wants a Reverend Compendium of Theology for their pastor."

"Where is your dear husband to-day?" Susan blinked about the room as if looking for him.

"You won't find him under the chairs," said Cornelia merrily.

"I beg your pardon, my dear; it's a habit I have. I am so used to looking for Tobias. . . ."

"I know," Cornelia laughed. "Michael has gone to the shore to play backgammon with Stedman. The poor man is bedridden, and it amuses him to have a game."

"Ah, poor creature! And how nice of the Minister to take the long walk, and spare the time for it."

"He can't very well; he has to sit up half the night to make up for it. The new chapel keeps him very busy, and he gives more time to his sermons than he used to."

"And yet the members don't seem so enthusiastic about them, though I must say I like his preaching more than I did. His sermons always went to the brain, but now they go straight to the heart."

"They go straight to mine," said Cornelia; "yet some one is always grumbling that there isn't enough doctrine in them."

"Some of the members find fault because the Minister has had his way about the rebuilding," said Susan. "But I don't see what they have to

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grumble at, since he has paid for it, and handed the chapel to the congregation."

Cornelia's face clouded. "Nothing goes right with that chapel. We thought it would have been finished for our Sonnie's christening, but they've been a year at it, and it's not ready yet."

"It's a wonderful thing to be a parent," said Susan. "Sun, moon, and stars revolve round the child. At one time the new chapel was the Minister's heaven and earth; now it's only the place where the baby is to be christened."

"Susan, you're horrid! You're as horrid as Arabella. And you're quite wrong about Michael. The chapel is his one idea still. I say to him, 'Don't you think my Sonnie's hair is thicker?' and he answers, 'They should be getting on those tiles now.' I tell him my Sonnie has cut a tooth, and he remarks that he is not satisfied with the carvings round the pulpit. He thinks more of the building of the church than of the building of the boy."

"My dear, I know he is just as good and earnest as ever he was, and I can't understand why he isn't as popular as ever. But for the last two years there have been critics and grumblers in the Church."

"Since our marriage?" Cornelia cried, her eyes startled. "And yet we've done nothing. . . . Arabella was saying there were queer stories about me. What can they be saying?"

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"My dear, whatever they may be saying, we know it's not true."

"Oh, of course it's not true!" Cornelia said proudly. "And after all, what does it matter what Arabella says? She dared to tell me my Sonnie squinted, and hadn't a good colour."

"She has a bitter tongue," said Susan. "I have sometimes thought she and Jacob Yates were at the bottom of all this criticism of our Minister. Well, well, time wears out the teeth even of our enemies."

"I don't know why Jacob is so bent on opposing my husband," said Cornelia. "Michael has done only good since he has been in Great Lowlands."

"Ah, my dear, opposition sprouts in private gardens." The Minister has disappointed Arabella, and crossed Jacob. You might give your husband a hint to conciliate Jacob when he can; the man has great influence with the members."

"That I'll never do!" Cornelia said proudly. "My husband to conciliate a wasp? Let him buzz away; we are not afraid of his sting."

"Ah, my dear, he can hurt you without stinging. Many a sweet fruit has been consumed by the wasp inside it."

"I think you want to spoil my sweet fruit with this talk of Jacob! No, Susan, I won't listen. Righteousness is stronger than sin, and Michael has nothing to fear."

"I've seen sin make righteousness to look like

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itself," said Susan. "Oh, yes, the devil can make white black, as well as black white. I don't wish to be uncharitable, but I've often thought what a good thing it would have been for the chapel if the Lord had seen fit to remove Jacob to a better and a brighter world at the same time that He took the old Minister. But His ways are not our ways. They say sweet little Nellie Brunt has got diphtheria, while Jacob flourishes like a green bay-tree and cumbers the ground."

"Nellie Brunt! Diphtheria!" Cornelia exclaimed. "Impossible! She was in Jacob's cottage yesterday with my Sonnie. Oh, Susan! and she kissed him!" All the colour faded out of Cornelia's face. She drew the baby close against her breast.

A swift fear showed in Susan's eyes, but she controlled it and spoke calmly. "Nellie was only taken ill last night, and it mayn't be diphtheria at all; people are so apt to exaggerate illness. And if it should be diphtheria, the sweet baby couldn't have taken it before it existed."

"No, of course not," Cornelia said, but she bent over the baby with anxious eyes. Then a wild terror swept across her face. "No, no!" she screamed; "it would be too cruel! God could not mock me so! Oh, Susan, I was glad when that old man . . . when my husband died. I was glad; but God wouldn't punish me by taking my little Sonnie from me?"

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She looked at Susan with a pitiful appeal.

"No, Cornelia; no, no, my dear. God is love. Don't upset yourself so. Think of the dear child; you may do him real harm if you get into a panic. Where could you find a wet nurse?"

"Arabella!" Cornelia laughed hysterically; "I should have to call in Arabella. No, Susan, I'm not in a panic; you see I can joke and laugh. Of course it's impossible. My Sonnie couldn't have taken it when it didn't exist. Arabella was quite wrong; his colour is healthy. My Sonnie, my little one lamb is quite safe. See how soundly he is sleeping! And his little rosebud toes are red and warm."

"Of course, my dear," said Susan tranquilly. "Now I will leave you to compose yourself. Remember, if you give way to needless alarm you will injure the child."

But an hour after Susan had left, Cornelia hung over the baby listening to his breathing, counting his pulses, feeling the heat of the little body. When Michael came home, tired from his long walk, she met him brightly, and said nothing to him of her fears. But that night she did not sleep at all; and every hour she slipped out of bed to look at the child, and to assure herself that there was nothing wrong with him.

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CHAPTER XXIV

It was night. God had locked the door of the darkness, and within it the sons of men were prisoners of sleep. The long High Street of Great Lowlands was silent; the trees folded their boughs about unseen dwellings. The lights that had shone like eyes had passed behind the door. Only the lamp over Dr. Kent's door kept its lurid watch. You could almost see the breathing of the silence round the red flame.

A white figure stole out from The Poplars, and sped along the cobbles, making no sound. Ruth had been moving noiselessly for days, and she walked now as if her footfall would disturb the child. Close to the surgery door she saw the doctor come out. She ran forward and overtook him.

"You have left Cornelia? Is there a change?" she whispered.

"No, poor little chap. I am going back now."

"Oh, Lewis, can't you save him?"

"I've done all I can, but it's hopeless," he said sadly. "Tracheotomy is impossible, and treatment by serum is not known in England yet. That poor woman! And yet I pity the father more. What a house of despair!"

"It is terrible, terrible!" Ruth said choking.

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"It would have been better for Cornelia never to have had a child."

"No," said Lewis; "she has learned the great secrets."

"Is there no hope?—none? Have you tried everything? Oh, Lewis, if you could save him, there's nothing I wouldn't give you!"

Lewis half stopped; should he tell her he had just risked his life in a vain attempt to save Cornelia's baby? Half an hour ago, with his own lips he had drawn the diphtheretic growth from the child's throat. Even now the poison might be working in him. . . .

He hesitated. No, he would not tell Ruth. What he had done, he had done because he was a doctor. He would buy no woman's love.

"In another hour it will be all over," he said hoarsely.

The girl moaned. They were at the garden gate of the Minister's cottage. The blinds were drawn, but there were lights in every window. Ruth thought of the blinds she had seen before in the house where an old man lay dead, and her heart failed her. "It is exactly two years ago to-day," she thought; "I wonder if Cornelia remembers."

They opened the door and crept up-stairs. They could hear voices in the parlour; Mrs. Nettlefold, and Susan Charm, and Eliza Yates were there. On the landing Ruth stopped a moment. Lewis waited for her, and she saw that his face

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was white and strained. He had watched with Cornelia three nights already.

They went into the room together. Cornelia sat holding the boy. Michael was beside her, his head bowed on his hands. He did not move as they came in, but Cornelia beckoned Lewis to her.

"You have saved him," she whispered; "he has been quiet ever since. He breathes so softly."

He knelt on the floor and studied the child. A gray shadow settled on his face. He rose and put his hand gently on her arm. She looked into his eyes, and she shivered. Her lips moved, but no words came.

"If you want me, I shall be outside," he said very pitifully. He signed to Ruth, and they went out together.

Cornelia drew the baby closer to her. "Michael," she said softly, "won't you look at our Sonnie before . . . before . . ."

He lifted his head, but turned away his eyes from her.

"I can't bear it!" he said hoarsely; "I can't bear it!"

"He has no pain now," said Cornelia. "I think he is not in pain, our little Sonnie." She took the baby's hands in hers. "His little hands are quite warm. I don't think it can be true. Oh, Michael!" her voice rose to a wail; "pray to God to give him back to us. Oh, Michael, if you would only pray. . . ."

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"The prayer of faith shall save. I have no faith," he said harshly.

She shuddered at the words. "My little Sonnie, my little Sonnie," she moaned; then she grasped her husband's arm; "but if you would pray. . . . God is very merciful. . . . He has promised. . . ."

"A jealous God visiting the sins of the fathers upon the children," he said sternly. "A God that answereth by fire."

"Hush, hush!" she entreated. She strained the child to her.

"Oh, God," she cried, "take my little Sonnie, if only thus Thou canst restore unto his father the joy of Thy salvation. But if Thou hidest Thyself from him, how shall this little one find Thee?"

Michael fell down on his knee. "Our Father," he cried; "Our Father. . . . Lead us not into temptation. . . ."

An awful quiet settled about them. . . . When the dawn lightened, none of the three had stirred.

"Such a dear little Sonnie," Cornelia was saying. "But the little red rosebuds are white rosebuds. . . . White rosebuds. . . ."

Cornelia sat in the Nettlefolds' pew, her arms about the coffin on her knee. She would not give up her little Sonnie till the great Earth Mother claimed her own. Sarah was with her sharing

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her grief, and Michael sat on the other side, his haggard face lifted to the empty pulpit. His mouth was rigid, his eyes sunken, but not with weeping.

The chapel was quite full; the members had forgotten their grievances in sympathy for the pastor. Sorrow was in their hearts as they looked at the stricken parents and thought of the child they should see no more.

One pew was empty—the Kents'; and its emptiness deepened the pathos of the funeral service. Lewis Kent was at home sick unto death. In trying to save the baby he had taken the diphtheria himself.

The people were very still, the hands of death resting upon them, but after a time a hushed restlessness stirred among the pews.

The men and women turned their eyes from the Nettlefolds' pew to the empty pulpit, and back to the door where Deacon Nettlefold and Jacob Yates consulted together in low voices.

Where was the minister from Framley who ought to have arrived an hour ago to read the service?

The minutes passed unnoticed by the two for whom time sped cruelly. The leaden coffin on Cornelia's knee winged the moments. She looked at the sealed lid and saw the open bosom of Earth.

Deacon Nettlefold came on tiptoe down the aisle and touched Michael. "Mr. Young hasn't

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come; and there isn't another train till six o'clock," he whispered. "If we wait, the interment can't take place to-day."

Michael turned his dazed eyes to him.

"I don't understand."

"There's no minister to read the service," the Deacon said in a louder voice. "If you could see your way . . . I deeply regret . . . But it gets late . . ."

Michael rose uncertainly and looked at Cornelia, then at the Deacon.

The Deacon laid his hand on his arm and guided him to the pulpit, placing his hand on the rail of the pulpit steps.

Michael dragged himself slowly up, a bent, broken man. He faced the congregation, and at the sight of his face a gust of sighs swept the chapel. In ten days he had become an old man.

The Bible was open on the desk, but he did not read from it. He looked straight before him, and when he spoke the women sobbed aloud; only Cornelia sat dry-eyed.

"*Suffer little children to come unto Me; and forbid them not, for of such is the Kingdom of Heaven . . .*

"*I know that whatsoever God doeth it shall be forever; nothing can be put to it, and nothing taken from it, and God doeth it that men should fear before Him . . .*

"*Lord, what is man, that Thou shouldest be*

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mindful of him, or the Son of Man that Thou visitest him? . . ."

The voice failed. He looked about him vaguely.

Then, vaguely still, he bent his eyes on the Book and read, "*Thou carriest them away as with a flood; they are as a sleep; in the morning they are like grass, which groweth up. In the morning it flourisheth and groweth up; in the evening it is cut down and withereth . . . For we are consumed by Thine anger, and by Thy wrath are we troubled. Thou hast set our iniquities before Thee, our secret sins in the Light of Thy Countenance. For all our days are passed away in Thy wrath; we spend our years as a tale that is told. The days of our years are three-score years and ten, and if by reason of strength they . . .*"

He stopped, his voice ceasing with a sudden effect of words reined in. He rested his hands on the desk and bowed himself forward, his eyes charged with horrified remembrance.

"Threescore years and ten!" he cried in a loud and terrible voice, that shocked through the mournful silence in the chapel. "Threescore years and ten! . . . Threescore years and ten! . . ."

His limbs shook under him; he was face to face with the devil that had sown the suggestion whose harvest he was reaping to-day. He heard behind him the feet of the Avenger of Blood. "A life for a life"—it was God's law. He had

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willed the death of an old man, and God had claimed the innocent life of his child . . . His eyes of horror turned to the Nettlefolds' pew, and fastened on Cornelia. He saw again the face he had seen that first Sunday morning, the face of the woman who had known life's passionate denial, and whom he could not help; the face of the woman he had loved, not knowing her to be already a wife.

And now a deeper agony was on her face, the everlasting denial of death; and he was powerless to help. He had laid the burden of his guilt upon her. He had sinned; and the hand of the Lord was upon the woman for his sin. . . .

There was a ghastly stillness in the chapel, but for the horror on the Minister's face that shattered the silence with a tumult as of wild voices. No one breathed. One terror swept over every face, whitening it; one awful certainty clutched at every heart. The Minister had gone mad.

Cornelia's cheeks were more leaden than the lead of the coffin, but she straightened herself, lifted her eyes, and smiled up at him.

The smile clove its way to his consciousness. He became aware of the rows of blanched faces, the appalled eyes. Slowly he raised himself, and slowly turned over the leaves of the Bible.

The people breathed again; a tremor moved along the pews as they waited for the words of the lesson.

"It's too much for him," said Mrs. Nettlefold;

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then broke off, and looked sharply towards the pulpit.

Michael's voice, harsh and unnatural, lashed the silence like a whip of knotted cords. His face was set above his hearers, no longer terrified, but stern and hard. There was something terrible in the fixedness of his eye.

"*Wherefore hast thou despised the commandment of the Lord to do evil in His sight? Thou hast killed Uriah the Hittite with the sword, and hast taken his wife to be thy wife; now therefore the sword shall never depart from thine house, because thou hast despised Me and hast taken the wife of Uriah the Hittite to be thy wife. Behold, I will raise up evil against thee. For thou didst it secretly, but I will do this thing before all Israel and before the sun. Thou shalt not die. Howbeit, because by this deed thou hast given great occasion to the enemies of the Lord to blaspheme, the child also that is born unto thee shall surely die. . . .*"

He closed the Bible and stood before them, his face strong and pitiful. Then slowly, halting at every step, he went down the pulpit stairs to where Cornelia was sitting, and lifted the coffin, and bore it into the aisle.

In the strained hush the first chords of the Dead March throbbed like a heart beating. With lifted head and blank eyes, Michael went out from before his people bearing his dead.

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CHAPTER XXV

"MOTHER, I must go to him," Ruth said in the passionless voice that Mrs. Nettlefold had learned to dread. "I have the right. I wanted him to save little Sonnie, even though he died. I was mad, I think, but I couldn't bear that Cornelia should lose her baby. And now I must save him."

"Oh, Ruth, think of the risk, child!" her mother wailed. "Diphtheria is the most catching. . . . I couldn't keep you from Cornelia in her trouble, but it's different with Lewis Kent. A young man, and you not engaged to him. . . . And the risk. . . ."

"Mother, say I may go; and if Lewis lives I'll be his wife."

"No, Ruth, I can't. Don't ask me, my dear. It ain't natural. You're all I have—and I can't send you to your death, not even to see you married. . . . Oh, my God! what a mocking thing life is. It only gives you what you want when it's no good to you."

The tears rolled down Mrs. Nettlefold's face, older than it had been ten days ago, for Cornelia's grief had been also hers. Her broken voice did not move Ruth from her purpose. She walked about the room in a vague, uncertain manner, but her face was steadfast.

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"Mother," she cried suddenly, "think of Lewis lying there dying, and only Arabella! Such a loving heart, such a strong, tender heart, and only Arabella when he is dying!"

"He's not alone, Ruth! No, no, Cornelia is with him. She went straight from the funeral to him, and the Minister too. He has loving, tender nurses. And Mrs. Brunt, too. Nellie's out of danger, and her mother won't leave the Doctor till there's a change. If you think he needs more nurses, I'll go—but not you, Ruth; not you, my dear."

Ruth went up and kissed her. "Dear mother," she said, stroking her cheek. "Dear mother . . . don't hinder me. It is I he loves."

"Oh, Ruth, you'll break my heart. You are sorry for Cornelia losing her baby, and you ask me to send you to your death. Have you no pity for your poor old mother?"

"A baby's life is part of its mother's life," Ruth said; "but I'm a woman like yourself. I have my own life."

"Ah, my God, that's life's bitterness!" Mrs. Nettlefold cried with a bitter cry. "You bear your child in your womb, and you bring it forth with the pains of hell; and when it is grown it casts you from it, and you are nothing to your child who has lain under your heart! Ah, my God! Cornelia will have her baby forever, but I've lost my girl, I've lost my girl forever!"

"Mother! Mother!" Ruth cried. "And still

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I must go! I must go! Lewis wants me. I belong to him."

Mrs. Nettlefold got up, wiping her face. The lines about her mouth set themselves hardly. Her voice was suddenly firm.

"Come then, I'll go with you. Arabella shan't have it to say my daughter did anything her mother couldn't approve. Come, Ruth, if you go to your death, it's me that takes you."

They went together along the street, not speaking. The sunshine slanted against their faces, and left the red lamp over the doctor's door in shadow. The skies smiled. The sunlight danced on the cobbles, through boughs roughened by waiting buds. The presage of spring was in the winter day, but their eyes were holden that they should not see it.

A group of fisher-folk and working people stood before Dr. Kent's door, silently reading the bulletin that was posted up every few hours. Their faces were heavy with a new heaviness. They lingered about the house, looking hopelessly at the windows behind which death and life fought.

"See how they love him," Ruth whispered. Her face was untroubled. She moved stilly, like one in a dream.

Arabella came to them, abrupt and important.

"Nurse Lewis!" she exclaimed. "Ruth nurse Lewis? Do you mean to say that she could do anything for him that I can't do? Well, really,

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Mrs. Nettlefold, you may mean kindly, but it's very queer kindness. Lewis is my brother; what is he to you?"

"He is everything to me," Ruth said. "And he loves me. Let me go to him; I have the right. I can save him, I know. Oh, I don't know what it is," she went on, her voice rising shrill, "but all at once it comes to me as it did at the fire, to go and save him. . . . He is in danger, and I can save him. . . . Oh, mother, mother! why didn't I know before? He has been part of my life, and I never knew it! I never knew it till now, when he is dying. Let me go to him, Arabella! I am his wife, his very wife!"

She made as if she would have passed her, but Arabella blocked the passage.

"A pretty brazen business!" she said, laughing disagreeably. "No, thank you, Ruth. Lewis belongs to me. I don't give him up to you, alive or dead."

"But let me see him," Ruth said wildly. "Just once—just to tell him. . . ."

"Thank you," Arabella said ironically, "you have nothing to tell him that it will do him any good to hear. I have no mind to encourage young women that throw themselves at a man's head."

"I can save him. I can save him," Ruth moaned, pressing her hands to her head.

"Ruth, my dear, come away," said her mother

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firmly. "You don't enter this house now till Arabella goes on her knees to you. I pray God, Arabella, you don't live to repent your wicked words."

She took Ruth's hand, and led her unresisting from the house.

Another group had gathered to read the bulletin. They stopped to gaze at the women coming out, and at the sight of Ruth's face, they fell back.

"No need to ask," a woman said. "Well, we shan't ever see his like again. God be with him, and make his bed easy. The Lord knows how the doctor have softened the dying bed of many that's gone."

Ruth gave the woman a terrified look, stopped and half-turned back to the door that Arabella had closed, but her mother led her on. Mrs. Nettlefold's heart was heavy with bitterness under her relief that Ruth would not risk her life. The iron had entered into her soul. That Ruth should love Lewis now, when it was too late, and that Arabella should triumph over her! . . . She gave a choking sob, and paused in her walk, her limbs shaking.

Ruth put her arm through hers. "You will always have your girl, mother," she said with her pale smile.

Mrs. Nettlefold's mouth twitched. "Can the child come back to the womb being born?" she asked bitterly. Then her tone changed. "What

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is past, is past, Ruth; but please God, we may make something of what's left of us. An old trimming on a new shape will cover your head as well as this year's bonnet."

She stepped out vigorously, and did not speak again till they reached Susan Charm's shop. She stopped there.

"I want some gray fingering for your father's socks, Ruth, and I want to ask Susan if she thinks Cornelia would take it badly if I offered to trim her a hat. It went to my heart yesterday to see what she was wearing at the funeral."

Susan was not in the shop. Barbara served Mrs. Nettlefold with the wool.

"No, ma'am, missus ain't out; she's in the parlour, and not to be called for anybody. She's been sobbing and crying all the morning."

"Ah, poor thing!" Mrs. Nettlefold sighed. "We are all born to trouble, and you'll have yours, Barbara, as soon as you know what it is to be a woman. Tell your missus not to fret—brooding never yet hatched addled eggs; and I doubt this world's an addled egg for most of us." Her mouth trembled again when she turned to Ruth. "Come, Ruth; come, my dear; we'll just get home to father. It ain't right to leave him for long, after the turn the Minister gave him yesterday."

"Oh, if you please, ma'am," said Barbara eagerly, "is the Minister mad? Jacob Yates

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said as how madhouse or prison would suit him better than the pulpit."

"Be ashamed of himself for the thought!" said Mrs. Nettlefold indignantly. "Mad, indeed! When it's the hand of the Lord upon him. Don't you dare to repeat it, Barbara. It's scandal-bearers that are scandalisers."

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CHAPTER XXVI

LATE that evening Susan was still sitting forlornly in the parlour. She was dressed to go out, but Tobias was asleep on her knee. The white strings of her bonnet made her curls look faded. Her Paisley shawl took the colour from her cheeks. Her eyes traveled from the door to the cat and back again. More than once she tried to rise, but she sank back in her chair each time, her head shaking, her lips trembling. She stroked Tobias with palsied fingers. By and by Tobias began to purr, and Susan started and looked about her as if she could see Cornelia sitting in the room holding her baby.

"Oh dear! oh dear!" she cried. "I'll have to do it. I missed the purr, but she will miss the weight in her arms, and the living feel of him, and the warmth. It ain't right to hesitate; a cat is better than a coffin, especially when it's Tobias. Poor thing! Poor Cornelia! There's trouble behind and trouble before her; and if the Lord had been pleased to take Jacob and leave the baby she'd have escaped it all."

She lifted Tobias and got up slowly. This time she passed the door and went through the shop into the street, carrying Tobias under her shawl. She did not seem to see the familiar

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faces of the houses, and the people going by, but her feet dragged when she came near to the Minister's cottage. The gate was open; she had no excuse to linger fumbling with the latch, but it took her a long time to step into the path. There was a scent of mosses in the garden, and a memory of the perfumes of past summers. Susan stopped, and gazed about her.

"It's musk," she said, half-aloud; "and there's a sweetbriar bush and rosemary, too; and Tobias always loved his pot of musk in the window. It's a beautiful garden for a cat, and I know he'll be happy in it. I've always felt it that I hadn't a little garden for him. It don't seem fair for me to have the garden in the cemetery and Tobias nothing but his pot o' musk in the window. I shouldn't grudge him to Cornelia, for I know he'll be happy in the garden, and the snails will amuse him; but, oh dear, dear! if I hadn't given the kittens to Phœbe Bassett, I needn't have parted with him now."

Sarah opened the door and took Susan to the study where Michael was. He was sitting gazing blankly at the notes for his sermon. Susan noted his haggard face, and she forgot Tobias.

"I hope that meddlesome creature, Jacob Yates, hasn't been here?" she said sharply.

"Yes," said Michael. "He came to suggest a supply for Sunday. It seems that Mr. Young is willing to take the services."

"Mr. Young would have done better if he had

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been in time for his train yesterday," said Susan. "It was a cruel ordeal for you, after all you've had to bear. You look on the edge of a sad break-down. My dear, we can't afford to lose our Minister."

"You have lost your minister," Michael answered sternly. "I am not worthy to serve God's people. The hand of the Lord is upon me in anger."

"Well, now," said Susan, pushing up her spectacles and looking pleasantly at him. "I read somewhere 'Whom God's hand rests on has God at His right hand.' But I'm not a preacher," she smiled, "so I can't preach to our Minister. I came to see Cornelia."

"She is still at the Kents'," he said. "The shadow that has fallen on us has fallen on the Doctor."

"I know, I know," Susan said sadly. "I am on my way there; but I thought . . . it seems to me . . . I felt that Tobias would be a comfort to Cornelia . . . and you . . . now that . . ." Her voice failed, but she cleared her throat and went on again: "I brought him with me . . . if you would accept . . ."

With shaking hands she laid Tobias on Michael's knee. He put his hand gently on the cat's head, and smiled sadly at her.

"You are a true friend, Susan; but we could not rob you of Tobias. We shall get used to the

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empty home. . . . It hurts his mother most," he added huskily. "I am glad she should not be here." He got up and put Tobias in Susan's arms. "I'll go and get him some milk."

Susan hugged the cat and tears brimmed over her eyes. "God forgive and pardon my hard heart," she cried joyfully. "I am happy, though Cornelia has lost her baby, and the noble Doctor is dying. . . . If you should change your mind," she said to Michael when he came in, "you might let me know."

She scarcely gave Tobias time to drink the milk. She caught him up, tucked him under her shawl, and hurried to the door. She gazed about the garden with eyes that snapped and sparkled.

"I was mistaken about this garden, Tobias," she said gaily. "It is no doubt damp, and you might have been tempted to eat the snails. A diet of snails would make you lazier than you are, idle fellow."

She chuckled at her joke—her heart was suddenly so light, she could have laughed aloud. Her feet almost ran along the path.

"I have no heart," she told Tobias. "I can't help being happy. Dear, dear, joy makes us selfish. But when I've taken you home, I'll go and see what I can do for the Doctor."

Arabella came to her wearing a worried face.

"He is very bad. We are waiting for the surgeons. But it's no use. He has given his life for that child. Mrs. Ross is there, but she can't

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save him now. . . . No thank you, Susan; everything's been done. When all's over I shan't have to reproach myself that I neglected anything!"

"Does Ruth know?" Susan asked huskily.

"Ruth know?" Arabella snapped. "Why should she? She is nothing to us."

"My dear, Lewis has loved her all his life. I am quite sure he would wish to see her now. She's not afraid of infection; she nursed Cornelia's baby. I'll go and bring her to him."

"Nothing of the sort, Susan! I won't have her here."

"My dear, it's a delicate subject, I know, but under the circumstances. . . . I have sometimes suspected she returned his affection. She would wish to be here!"

"I've no time to argue," said Arabella. "I won't have her, that's all."

She ran up-stairs again to her brother's room.

She saw his eyes turned disappointed from her as she came in, and her heart was bitter. "I'm nothing to him, though I've given up my life to him. . . ."

His eyes had been on the door ever since the morning when he had heard Ruth's voice in the hall. He would not send for her to run the risk of infection, but Arabella knew it was Ruth for whom he was watching. She went over to his

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bedside and touched his forehead. Even in the five minutes of her absence his temperature had risen. She felt him shrink from her rough touch, and her heart tightened.

"He looks better," she said to Cornelia, in a grating voice.

"He is so restless," Cornelia answered. "If he could only sleep!" Her hand, soft and cold as snow, rested on his head. The light in her eyes had been quenched, but her face had a strange depth of tenderness that was like light. Lewis smiled faintly when she touched him. Arabella turned away, a gnawing fear at her heart.

She walked to the window, and stood looking into the dark street. She remained a long time without moving, her heart tightening round the dread. She seemed to have stood like that before, looking into the darkness, but then hope had fluttered in her heart. Michael's words, "You are an angel announcing a new life," had lighted lamps in the darkness. She had been stirred by the clasp of his hand. She remembered how she had tried to cast Ruth out of his heart and to take her place, and how she had thought she had succeeded. It had been the only time in her life when love had seemed to be within her reach, and remembering it, her heart softened. She felt again the stir and movement of the days when hope had been with her. Then the bitterness of her awakening came back,

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and she knew the pain of desertion. Ruth had shared that pain with her, as she was to share this new loss. They had both loved Michael and Lewis, and both were to lose Michael and Lewis. . . .

A lump swelled in Arabella's throat. Ruth's "I can save him" rang in her ear, and would not be silenced. She had said she would have nothing to reproach herself with if Lewis died. Was it true? Would not his eyes reproach her? She hardened her heart again. No one should know that she had been set aside for Ruth.

"Arabella," Cornelia called softly; "he wants you."

Gulping down her thoughts, she crossed to the bed and leaned over.

"Dear old girl," Lewis said, gasping between each word; "you've done your best . . . but . . . everything's in order . . . it's all yours . . . You'll be lonely . . . but there's Ruth . . . tell her . . ." Arabella lifted his head, and held some water to his lips. He closed his eyes and lay silent.

Mrs. Brunt tiptoed nearer. "The doctors won't be in time, miss."

Arabella remained beside the bed, her mouth clenched in a grim line. No, she would not humble herself to ask Ruth to come. The shaded lamps cast a wan light on the sick man. His face carved out against the shadows was very noble.

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"He saved others, and now there's none can save him," Mrs. Brunt sobbed.

"I can save him! I can save him!" sounded among her sobs.

Suddenly Arabella turned and went swiftly from the room. She did not wait to put on hat or wrap, but ran into the street and along towards The Poplars. Her face was very hard.

The light in Ruth's window guided her through the garden. She went straight up to Ruth's parlour, and walked in without knocking.

Ruth was pacing the room. All the life had been blotted out of her face; she was like a ghost. Seeing Arabella, she stopped. Her lips parted, but she did not speak.

"Ruth," Arabella said humbly; "I beg your pardon for what I have said. Will you come? He's . . . he's . . . But you may save him. . . ."

They ran along the street together. Arabella opened the door of Lewis's room, and Ruth passed in. She went towards the bed, her face dead but for the eyes that shone like lamps in their hollow sockets. Lewis's hands moved restlessly, but his eyes were closed. Cornelia made way for her, and Ruth knelt down and took his hands in hers and laid her face against them. . . .

An hour after she knelt there still. "Don't move," the doctor whispered; "if he sleeps he may pull through."

The surgeons with him looked at each other,

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and then doubtfully at Ruth. "Have you a strong nerve? Can you stay if . . ."

"I am not going to leave him again," she said, lifting her steady eyes.

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CHAPTER XXVII

"I HAVE no wish to judge any man," said Jacob Yates; "and least of all the Pastor. But when the Lord speaks, I dare not hold my peace."

"If the Lord speaks," Eliza remarked; "it behoves us to be silent."

Jacob wiped his mouth, coughed, looked furtively round the vestry, and let his eyes light on the text in the lozenge over the mantelpiece.

"Whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap," he said truculently. "If the Minister have sown to the flesh, of the flesh he will reap corruption. And it behoves me and Deacon Nettlefold and the other deacons to see that a man of corrupt life is put out of the Church."

At the words every one started. The women dropped their sewing, sat straight, and stared at Jacob and at each other. It was the meeting of the sewing society, and most of the members of the Church were present. In the pause that followed Jacob's words, Susan Charm was heard to speak in an unsteady voice.

"It is not right to judge the Minister when he is in bitter grief and not here to answer for himself."

"The question have to be raised," said Jacob,

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firmly; "and it's well to raise it when the Minister and his wife is absent."

Deacon Nettlefold rose slowly from the bench beside his wife, regardless of her hand plucking at his coat. "No, my dear," he said aloud; "let Jacob speak. He's been working in the dark against the Minister, we know. Let him bring his work to the light that it may be judged."

"He's always had a grudge against Mr. Ross," said Mrs. Bassett. "It isn't fit that a man like that should criticise our Minister."

"I bear no man any grudge," said Jacob, "but I have a duty to the Church, and that duty I will do. We have a new chapel to be opened, and the man as ministers in it should be a man of clean life. That man Mr. Ross is not. I will tell you how I know it, and when I've done, the members shall see if I'm right."

He rose in his seat, cleared his throat, put his thumbs in his waistcoat pockets, and spoke in a voice which he vainly tried to make impressive.

"Mr. Ross come among us a young man, heedless and thoughtless, but genooine as far as he went. He had a proud heart, and the old chapel wasn't good enough for him. He set himself to build a new one, and wasted his time doing work that Deacon Nettlefold was paid to do. I don't say any great harm come of it. The congregations kep' up, and the collections was good. Then he coorted the Deacon's darter, and there being nothing agen the young woman the mem-

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bers was satisfied; for the Deacon's money would be always in the Church. . . ."

"It's insolence, that's what I call it!" Mrs. Nettlefold interrupted fiercely; but Jacob silenced her with a wave of his hand, and went on.

"The first public act that prejoodiced the Minister was in the matter of William Brunt. That man was hanged for murder, yet our Minister stood on the scaffold and comforted him with the hope of heaven. That, my friends, showed that the Pastor thought light of the sin of murder. And that's my first point. . . .

"Then we come to the visit of Mrs. Dawson to the Deacon. Now what was known about that young woman? That she was turned out of her sitooation for loose behaviour; and that she cajoled a man of God into marriage. We know that Mr. Dawson found her out; for he left his money from her, and give orders to be buried with his first wife's wedding-veil, showing that he didn't look on the young woman as his wedded wife.

"My friends, it's calkerlated to ruin the cause that the Church people goes about saying that Mr. Ross's wife is a light woman. Why did Lawyer Pace give up his sittings after the Minister's marriage? Because they knew the kind o' woman Mrs. Ross was. That's my second point. The Minister thinks light of murder, and he thinks light of looseness. . . .

"Mrs. Dawson hadn't been a week in Great

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Lowlands before she got hold of Mr. Ross walking on the cliffs, seeing him private at his own house, and at The Poplars. She led him into a lie first off. He come out of The Poplars one day, after talking with her the better part of an hour, and bold as brass he said as how he hadn't so much as seen Mrs. Dawson. The day the bridge at Devil's Dyke was swep' away, how did Mr. Ross behave to the young woman he was as good as engaged to? He left her to do as she could while he saved the wife of another man. If that don't show what was going on, I don't know anything as does. . . .

"Then Mrs. Dawson sets off home, and word come that her husband was a-dying. It might be a nateral thing, or it might not; I don't say it ain't—I put it to you. But it was then Mr. Ross behaved strange in the pulpit: offering up a prayer for the old minister as if he had been an evil liver. Mr. Dawson got better; and from that day Mr. Ross was a changed man, morose and silent, when before he had been happy and frolicsome. He fell off from keeping company with the Deacon's darter, and the cause began to go back.

"Then come the time when Mr. Dawson were at Cove Bassett. Did Mr. Ross visit him as one minister to another? No, he kep' away, showing his conscience wasn't clear towards him.

"Then the Lord laid me on a bed of languishing; and this give Mr. Ross his opportunity.

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He indooced me to send for Mr. Dawson by the falsehood that I were a-dying. He said I were in the very article of death; and, believing him, I asked for the old pastor. Did Mr. Ross tell me a lie, or did he not? I ask you, what for did he stoop to lying, to bring the old minister to a fever-bed? What did David do when his heart was set on another man's wife? He set him in the battle where the danger was. I don't say Mr. Ross did it to the old minister; but I do say Miss Kent warned him that the fever was infectious, and I leave you to judge his motive in bringing Mr. Dawson to my bedside. If there was nothing in it, what was to prevent him giving burial to Mr. Dawson? But no! Mrs. Dawson sent for the minister from Chernside, a good ten mile further from Framley than Great Lowlands. . . .

"After that Mr. Ross's behaviour in the pulpit got very strange. Instead o' praying for the Queen and the country and the Members o' Parlyment as needed it, all his supplication was for the tempted and tried. His preaching fell off, and was not so taking with the people. You could see his manner rougher and gloomier. He passed his members in the street and never saw them, him that had been so brotherly. If he visited the sick, was it to read the Word to them? No, it was to play games o' chance with the afflicted. That shows he'd lost his hold on true religion. . . .

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"He went out of his way to say in public he would never marry. Them were his words. He hadn't no intentions of never marrying. My friends, a month after that day our Minister went stealthy into a register office, and come out a married man. And this wasn't all, for the woman he married was Mrs. Dawson, whose husband wasn't cold in his grave. Was it ever known before that a pastor was married in a register office? And why? Because he couldn't ask God's blessing on a union of sin. . . . It was said he met Mrs. Dawson accidental. I ask you, was it accident that she should be on the platform, with her luggage in the cloak-room ready to be claimed? Was it accident that she should be in the chapel at Sandy Hurst wearing a thick veil the Sunday before? Was it accident that the Minister kep' his marriage secret from his house-servant, and come slinking home at night like a man that's done something he's ashamed of?

"But from that day the hand of the Lord was on him in judgment. He gave the enemy cause to blaspheme by taking Sarah Godson, as was a fallen woman, into his own service. Mark that! for it shows how light he thought of the sin of fornication.

"The congregations got thinner and thinner. Him that had used to draw the whole town couldn't fill the pews with his own members. His preaching wasn't worth the hearing. You

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could have had the same any day at the Established Church—poor weak stuff about love and mercy, and no doctrine at all. Why did he leave out the doctrine? Because judgment and wrath, and the penalty of sin, hit him too hard. But the hand of the Lord kept a tight hold. When the time came for the new chapel to be opened, the Lord sent a fire to devour it. Good money was put into that chapel; but the Lord wouldn't have it because the hand of sin had touched it.

"Well, the lesson was plain, but the sinner wouldn't see it. He hardened his heart, and set himself to build, agen the wishes of his members. He gifted the money for it, but one thing after another hindered the work. The child of that sinful marriage was born on a Sunday; and wasn't the hand of the Lord in that? The Minister's lips were closed; he couldn't offer up a prayer, and he showed the congregation that something was wrong. But still the Minister hardened his heart, and kep' on with the building.

"Then the hand of the Lord touched him in his very marrow, and the child of sin was taken from him. And then it was his sin come home to him in the sight of the congregation, and, not knowing what he did, he read the chapter from the Word as applied to him. We thought trouble had gone to his head; but it was the hand of the Lord that led him to show his sin. . . . My friends, the story of David and Uriah's wife

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is the story of our Minister. His sin is the sin of David, and his punishment is a-waiting of him. He must give way for a better man—a man as we can honour and respeck. Mr. Krupp of Sandy Hurst is a choice young man, and dependent on his salary, as a minister should be if the deacons is to guide him. My proposal is, to ask Mr. Krupp to take the pastorate, and open the new chapel as the beginning of his work among us. It would give him a send off as would draw big collections. . . . And the Lord help us all to be faithful to the light that is in us. Amen."

Jacob sat down, bowed his head on his hands, and remained as if in prayer.

The minutes passed and no one spoke. Then his wife got up, her sharp little face grim with determination. Her voice fell drily on the shocked silence.

"If it's true as a man reaps what he sows," she said, "I pray I don't live to see Jacob's reaping of the seed he's sowed this day. He have put together a story out of his own sinful heart. We know who have looked on a woman for twenty year to want her. We know who have wished the death of his own wife that he might marry that woman. We know who have married his son to that woman, and led him to commit open sin; and if the Lord can pardon him, it's more than I can. I bear you no malice, Eliza; you are a good wife to Jimmie, and the Lord was mindful of you when he kep' you from marrying

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Jacob; but I do say as it's not Jacob Yates as should throw the first stone at our dear Minister."

She sat down, and looked fixedly at Jacob's bowed head.

Susan Charm had listened terrified to Jacob's story. She remembered Michael's ashen face when she had said the shadow of crime would be at his Christmas board. She remembered his terrible cry, "The hand of the Lord is upon me," and her heart fell in her. She tottered to her feet. Agitation set her curls trembling, but her voice remained steady.

"I wish to say that every day I respect and reverence our dear Pastor more and more. He has walked before us in joy and sorrow, and I find no fault in him. Jacob Yates is to be pitied for his malice; but if we wear green glasses, we can't help seeing green. As to compassing murder; call me murderer if you will, but not the Minister; for when I would have drowned Tobias's kittens he stayed my hand. 'All life is sacred,' he said, 'even a kitten's life.' His very words. You all know how he went into the sea to save the shipwrecked; and is this the man that would plot to take a fellow-creature's life? Why, it was I myself that carried the letter to Mr. Dawson warning him that it was typhoid that Jacob had."

"Yes," Mrs. Bassett interrupted, "and though I did notice something strange between the Minister and Mrs. Dawson at Phœbe's party, I

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must say I gave the letter to Mrs. Dawson, and she told me Mr. Ross had warned her husband of danger if he went to Jacob."

Jacob lifted his head sharply, and showed his teeth like a dog snarling.

"You gave Mrs. Dawson the letter. Did she, or did she not hand it to Mr. Dawson? It wasn't her wish to keep him alive; and she didn't even show him the respeck of a black gown when he was gone."

"Be ashamed of yourself," Mrs. Nettlefold burst in. "Will any one say as Mrs. Ross was glad when her baby died? Yet you all saw her at the funeral wearing a coloured hat—which I am sure I'd have trimmed her one in time if I'd dreamed of such a thing."

"It's no use wasting words," Jacob growled. "The scandal is over the town; the Church people and Baptists and Primitives is all talking and asking how we can sit under a man that's as good as confessed his sin. Mr. Ross must go; and I propose that the pastor from Sandy Hurst be asked in his place. And them that agrees with me, hold up your hands."

For a moment there was no response. "Them as agrees with me, hold up your hands," Jacob said again.

Deacon Nettlefold lifted his head heavily. "Hands up, or hands down, this ain't a Church meeting called regular, and it can't make the Minister resign. There's one thing I must say.

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Jacob said as Mr. Ross gave my girl the go-by. That ain't true. My daughter never had anything to say to his courting; and she's to be married to young Dr. Kent just as soon as he's well enough. I don't believe that any part of what Jacob has said is truer than that; and if Mr. Ross hadn't read that chapter at the funeral I'd have stuck by him. But there's scandal in the town, and with a new chapel to support we can't afford to disregard it. Therefore it might be as well to take the feeling of the members present before we call a meeting regular. So them that think Mr. Ross should be asked to resign the pastorate before we open the new chapel, be pleased to hold up their hands."

He looked round him, and his face dropped. While he was speaking Michael had come into the vestry. He stood among the seated figures, and when the Deacon stopped, he lifted his hands above them, the first to agree. But it was as if he was in the act of blessing them.

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CHAPTER XXVIII

MRS. NETTLEFOLD and Eliza Yates were shown into Michael's study. He turned round from his desk, and rose to meet them. Their faces were grave, and yet their presence brought a lightening of the gloom that had fallen on the man.

Eliza took the chair he drew forward for her, tilted her head, and gazed at him with kindly eyes.

"I knew as you'd be brooding," she said, "and it ain't natural for a man to brood. Leave that to women and hens. Cocks was made to crow, even if they've nothing better than a dunghill to crow on."

"That's true if anything is," struck in Mrs. Nettlefold. "Bless me, it's a poor cock that can't find a dunghill somewhere. Now then, Mr. Ross, we've come round to hearten you up a bit about this business of giving up the chapel." She smoothed down her skirt and beamed on him.

"You are very kind," said Michael wearily. "But it's all settled, and Mr. Krupp of Sandy Hurst has been asked to take the Church."

"I know he has," Mrs. Nettlefold exclaimed indignantly. "And I've no patience with the

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fish as swims with the stream. The Deacon was one of them, but Ruth and me have brought him to a better judgment. He has written to the deacons at Sandy Hurst to tell them you're a man misjudged. And to my mind Mr. Krupp will be of a mean spirit if he's willing to come after that."

"Not to speak of the unfairness of giving him the chapel you built, and as good as paid for," chimed in Eliza. "The Deacon says if you'd only ask pay for the re-building, you could have the new chapel and preach there yourself, for they can't pay for it. Then them that's for another pastor could have the old chapel, and the rest of us would follow you to the new one."

Michael shook his head sadly. "I gave the chapel to the members. You will remain faithful to my teaching when you are in it."

"Sitting under a weak vessel like the minister from Sandy Hurst!" Mrs. Nettlefold cried scornfully. "No, Mr. Ross, that we won't do! We want our own Minister as won't make himself a shovel for Jacob Yates to shovel up the money with on a Sunday. The minister from Sandy Hurst don't see over the edge of the collecting plate, and that's why he suits Jacob."

"I know what the love o' money is," Eliza chuckled, "for it's my besetment, and I despise it. Lor! I could laugh when I think how I've done Jacob out of my little property. I've made my will and left it all to Sarah; and when I'm

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gone she and Jimmie can marry and Jacob won't have a finger in my pie."

"Well, indeed, Eliza, I hope you won't leave us in my time," said Mrs. Nettlefold feelingly. "Yours are the only tea-cakes I can eat without them lying heavy on my stomach."

"We never know," said Eliza cheerily. "Doctor Kent says something's wrong inside me, and any day I may start for the churchyard. And though you wouldn't read the marriage service over me, Mr. Ross, I ask you as a favour to stop with us and lay my poor bones in the ground."

"My dear friend!" Michael said, "I cannot stay; the hand of the Lord has driven me forth.

He remained alone, his head bowed on his hands. He would not dwell on their comfortable words. He had sinned, and the child that had been born to him had died for his sin. It could not be a mere coincidence that the baby should have taken diphtheria in the very house where he had first wished for the death of Cornelia's husband. And now his church had been taken from him, and he saw his life before him, a desert in which were no palm-trees and no waters of healing. It was right, he thought humbly. He had confessed his sin before the congregation; he would not murmur because they refused to have him to minister to them.

"Lord, who shall abide in Thy tabernacle?

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Who shall dwell in Thy holy hill? He that hath clean hands and a pure heart."

"But the hand of the Lord is very heavy," he groaned. He must give up his house of dreams, the chapel that he had built with his own hands. He would never build another. All his ideals, his youth, his hope, his enthusiasm had gone to the building of the church from which he was cast out. He lifted his head and saw before him the weary procession of the years. He could not have borne the vision but for Cornelia. Her strength would go with him. But ah! how life had mocked him. It had mocked him by those months of happiness, when he had rejoiced with the wife of his youth, and had seen his work prosper, and the child of his love growing in the midst of the years. It had mocked him by giving him feet that stumbled, only because he was too eager to reach the heights. It had mocked him with a heart strong to fear God, and weak to follow Him. . . .

The door opened, and Cornelia came in. She gave a sorrowful look at Michael, then laid her hand tenderly on his shoulder. Her face was worn with grief, but the steadfast soul looked out of her eyes. "They have accepted your resignation?"

"Yes," he said sadly. "I have no church. After I have preached to others, I am myself a castaway."

"A castaway?" she cried. "No! but God's anointed."

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She raised herself, and stood tall and straight before him, her eyes shining, a bright light on her worn face.

"Michael, you set yourself to build a church—a perfect house of God. You offered Him wood and stone and beautiful workmanship. Oh, but you didn't see that God's Church must be built of souls, of men and women who sin and suffer and are tempted. God rejects your church of wood and stone only that you may build the living Church of the lives round you. You thought that the hand of the Lord was on you in judgment. Don't you see that it has been with you, preparing your way before you, to make you His minister?"

"His minister?" he cried with a great cry. "My lamp has gone out. I am in thick darkness. I have preached peace when there was no peace. Now I have no message."

"No message?" she said in a low, thrilling voice. "Oh, Michael, haven't you learnt what it is to be tempted? There are men and women that are in temptation round you. Haven't you known what it is to sin? Haven't you known what it is to leave sin, and cleave to goodness? There are men round you who love and are weak. Can't you teach them to love and be strong? There are men that suffer; and haven't you passed that way? Oh, Michael, there are mothers that look on their little dead children. . . . Oh, Michael, haven't you tears to weep with them?"

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She stopped, her voice breaking, and lifted her dim eyes to his.

"What would you have me to do?" he asked hoarsely.

"The old chapel is to be sold. Buy it, and build your church in it, not outside it."

"The place is full of bitter memories," he said. "I should never go into the pulpit without remembering."

"Don't try to forget," she said tenderly. "It is only by the memory of our temptations that we can help those that are tempted."

"Not the old chapel; anywhere but the old chapel!" he groaned. "It is there that I dreamed; it is there that I failed. Every stone in the place is a witness against me. On every wall, God has written my doom. *Found wanting. Thy Kingdom divided. Cast out.* Can I speak of pardon, remembering the child punished for my sin? How can I strengthen others, I that am weak?"

She looked pitifully at him. "Ah, Michael, you are weak, but your weakness is the strength of a son of God."

She laid her hand on his shoulder. "I love the old chapel, Michael. It is there I carried my misery; it is there your goodness saved me. I held our Sonnie in my arms there, to give him to God. I held him there when God took him from us."

"It is there I sowed the good seed," he said

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brokenly. "Hope and love and gladness in God. Am I to go there to reap failure and doubt and despair?"

"Whatsoever a man soweth that shall he also reap," she answered. The great light on her face shone on Michael. He turned away and covered his eyes with his hands. . . .

They went out together towards the shore. Deep called unto deep. The great depths of ocean in their eternal peace would quiet the troubled passions of his heart.

The cry of the gulls, the great waste of waters, the gleaming, lonely shore, the sob of the waves would echo the unrest of his heart to soothe it.

Arabella ran along the street after them. "I was going to see you," she said breathlessly. "I thought you'd like to know. The deacons at Sandy Hurst are going to ask you to come and be their pastor. Alice says they're all agreed to show Jacob what a wrong and malicious thing he's done."

"He was right," said Michael sternly. "In the sight of God, he was right."

"He is not God, that he should judge," Arabella snapped. "You haven't failed towards man; if you've failed towards God, let Him deal with you, not Jacob. It doesn't look as if God thought you guilty when he calls you to a new church before you've left the old one."

"If I could believe that!" Michael said. He hurried on greatly moved.

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Arabella followed him.

"You said once I announced a new life to you," she said very gruffly. "It was true then, and it's true now. Your life is before you; a new church, and a congregation that won't be so ready to believe evil."

Her voice was harsh and strident as ever, but there was a new softness in her face. Her nose looked less sharp under the appeal in her eyes.

Michael wrung her hand. "God bless you for those words."

He walked on with Cornelia past the new chapel. The old, unsightly buildings were no longer standing, but the white walls had been blackened by the smoke of the fire. The door was open, and they could hear Jacob's voice inside. The man answering him was the minister from Sandy Hurst, who had come over to inspect the church that had been offered him.

A look of pain flashed over Michael's face, and he walked on hastily. They did not speak, but near the Abbey gates they met Susan Charm carrying a handful of snowdrops. She ran forward and took Michael's hand in hers.

"My dear," she said, her voice heavy with tears, "I have heard that you are going to leave us. I cannot think it right that evil should triumph over good like that. I don't understand; I can only trust. Look at these snowdrops. They grew on a grave. Don't you see

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that God can turn our graves into gardens for us?"

Michael gazed about him uncertainly.

"I think perhaps it would be more brotherly if I went to speak to Mr. Krupp. He may like to ask me some questions," he said.

He left the two women and forced himself to go back to the chapel. The door was still open. but when he entered he found the place empty, He stood and looked round at the house he had built, and his heart swelled. There was no trace here of the fire. All was fair and beautiful again; his hand was on every part. The carving round the pulpit was his own work. "*Through shades and symbols to the truth.*" What was the truth concerning him? Had Cornelia found it when she said that God's hand had been on him not in judgment, but in preparation for a higher work—the building of a living Church? Had Ruth found it when she said, "It is not how we preach, but how we love that helps"? Had Arabella found it when she told him the offer of the church at Sandy Hurst was a token of God's acceptance? Was she not indeed the angel of the Annunciation to him? He might leave the history of failure and rejection and begin a new life among a new people. He remembered the days among the roses, the dreamy pantheism that had seemed a better thing than his old faith. He remembered the rich congregations among whom he might forget the hardness and the

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stress of life—and remembering, the old life with its storm and struggle and strenuous striving seemed to him a higher life.

Had not the hand of the Lord been leading him to build the living Church there in Great Lowlands "to the glory of God and in memory"? He had been blind; but now through the shadows and the symbols he saw the truth.

He gazed about him. The sun streamed in, filling aisle and pew. The silence was undeepened by any memory. He missed the shadows, the familiar faces of worn and rugged men. He missed the stress of the hours when he had clung despairingly to the mercy of God. He missed the burden of the little coffin. He missed the throb of the organ beating like a great heart in the stillness.

He looked on the walls, and saw only the work of his hands. No Divine record, no threat that blossomed into a promise was written there. It was the empty husk of a church.

He passed out of the building and found Cornelia outside. He leaned on her arm and took his way along the High Street towards the old chapel, a great humility and a great hope in his heart.

THE END

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